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WESTERN TALES

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DEAD MAN'S
VALLEY

by WM. HEUMAN

HELL FANS
THESE
GUNS!

A NOVEL BY
THOMAS C.
McCLARY



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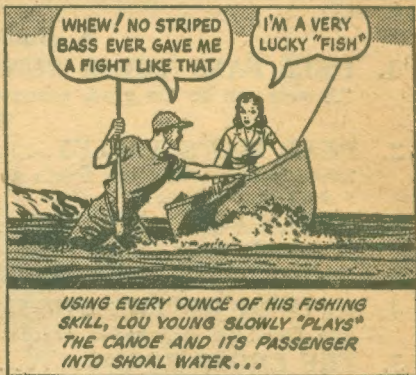
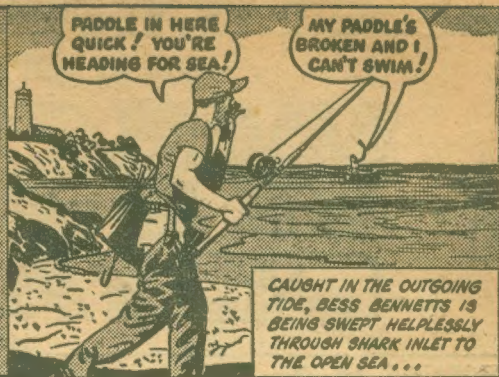
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15 STORIES 25 CENTS

VOLUME 14, No. 1



OCTOBER, 1947

A Book-Length Trail-Blazer

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By WILLIAM
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DEAD MAN'S VALLEY



"Nobody knows how this fight's goin' to turn out, but I don't mean to run, mister—an' I don't mean to die!"

CHAPTER ONE

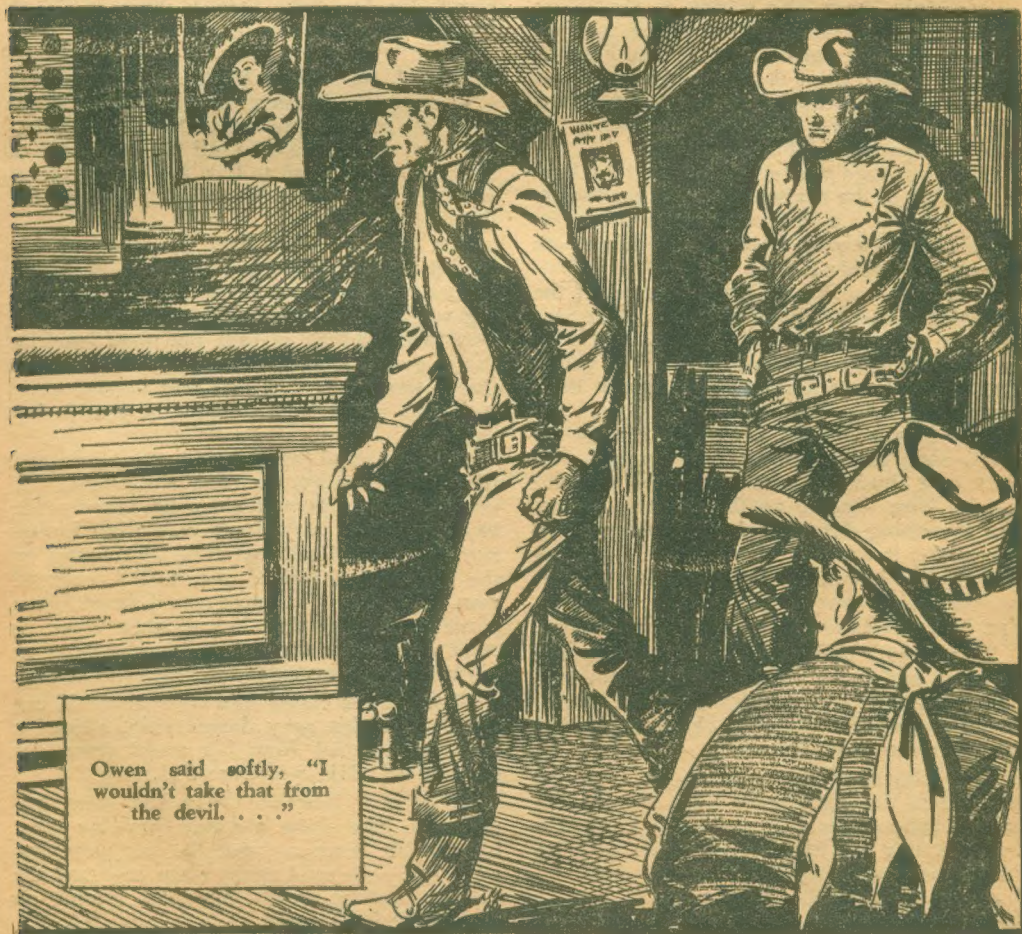
Death Valley Rider

HE FIGURED that he was still about seven or eight miles south of Braxton City and on the edge of Death Valley when he saw the apparition. He'd never seen twenty mules hitched to one outfit before, and he'd never in his life seen wagons the size of these four ton vehicles, two of them hitched together, a smaller water tank trailing behind, each wagon at least sixteen feet long, six feet deep, filled with borax.

Owen Steele sat astride the big bay horse, his slim brown fingers rolling a cigarette, looking down from a ridge across an expanse of

silvery salt marsh, dried up, shimmering in the terrific heat. The graded road over which the twenty mule team was moving ran as straight as an arrow across the marsh, disappearing among long files of huge boulders which had been swept down from the Funeral Range by cloudbursts centuries ago.

Heat lifted up from the valley below like the heat from a stove. It was unlike any heat Owen had experienced before. Back in Mojave Junction a man had said that the desert was hot, but that Death Valley was a piece of hell on earth. Owen Steele, watching the huge



Owen said softly, "I wouldn't take that from the devil. . . ."

wagons rumbling over the graded road a quarter of a mile away was inclined to agree.

He found some grim humor, too, in the fact that Death Valley, last outpost of the southwestern frontier, was a fitting place for a man who had been banished from the society of honest men to end his days. He wasn't quite sure why he'd drifted in this direction after the town marshal of Salome and a sixty man vigilante committee suggested that he leave on penalty of death. He hadn't run away, but he was tired of Salome.

Heading south and then west, he'd drifted into Mojave Junction and there listened to the wild, fantastic stories of Death Valley and the big borax works; stories, too, of the mythical Christian Flagge, king of the valley.

In Mojave they were talking of the huge castle Flagge was constructing in the furnace of Death Valley—constructing it with the enormous profits he was making, snaking borax out of the pit of hell. There were stories of a bloody borax war raging in the valley, where hired gunhands were making as much as two hundred dollars a month in Flagge's employ. Aside from natural curiosity, Owen Steele was impressed by this latter figure, bigger money than he'd ever received in the past for the hire of his own Colt.

The two huge wagons were within a hundred yards of the nearest boulders, the twenty mules moving at a sharp trot, when Owen distinguished the almost imperceptible movement among the boulders.

Throwing one leg over the pommel of the saddle, he watched with interest. This was not his affair as yet, but he was filled with an idle curiosity as to the manner in which the borax men of Death Valley fought their private wars.

He'd fought with the cattle men against the sheep men, and the other way around—and then he'd lined up with both sides to stop nesters from digging up the country. Borax was something different—it was neither sheep nor cattle; it was not silver nor gold—it was something Chinamen scooped out of the salt marshes, and now something which Christian Flagge was using to establish an empire.

There was a white puff of smoke from the boulders, and Owen Steele saw one of the lead mules stumble and go down on its knees. There was a quick pile-up as the teams behind ran on to the fallen animal.

Two columns of riders swung out from the boulders as the big wagons came to a sudden halt. A lone driver rode the lead wagon. He was reaching for his shotgun when a bullet struck him, knocking him from the seat.

Owen Steele frowned. He was comparatively well hidden from view, only his head and shoulders protruding above the ridge, and there was another rise of land behind

him so that he was not outlined against the sky. He made no move to leave his position as the ten riders bore down on the stalled wagons, but the frown on his face deepened. He'd always liked the odds to be fairly even in any kind of fight, and he'd assumed two, possibly three men, were among the boulders waiting to intercept the borax wagons. Ten to one was a little too stiff, and they'd shot the driver down without giving him a chance for his life.

He could make out the name painted on the side of the wagon. It was Concord Borax, which meant that the ten riders were very probably Flagge's men. Owen watched them cut loose the mules, detaching them from the long chain. He wasn't quite sure of what they were doing next because he was too far away to see the details. Then a thin column of white smoke lifted into the still air of the valley. Flame broke out a few moments later, and in five minutes the huge wagons, their wood dry from the furnace heat of Death Valley, were burning furiously.

THE ten riders trotted leisurely away from the burning wreck, moving down the graded road in the direction of Braxton City. Owen waited until they were out of sight. He was about to turn the bay and head north himself when he thought he saw the driver down below.

The man had fallen from the seat after being hit and he lay huddled near some mesquite bushes about twenty-five yards from the burning wagons. One of the attacking party had gone over to look at him, and then left him there, giving Owen the impression that the driver was dead. The man was moving now, trying to crawl back toward the smoldering wagons.

Owen watched him for a few moments, and then turned the bay down an erosion cut. He made the valley floor in about ten minutes, the bay picking its way down carefully. Riding across the dried salt marsh he dismounted by the wagons and walked over to the wounded man. The driver had progressed about fifteen yards during the time it had taken Owen to come down from the ridge. He was lying on his side now, arms extended, fingers twitching.

When Owen rolled him over he could see the front of his gray flannel shirt stained a dark red, dirtied from his crawl down the gravel road. His eyes were flickering.

At Mojave Junction Owen had been cautioned to take along a water bag. He went back to his horse and got the bag. He was walking up the road again when he heard the riders pounding toward him, just coming up over a rise in the road.

From the top of the ridge the road had appeared to run across the valley floor which

was as flat as a table top, but at the bottom of the valley Owen could see that there were gradual rises and dips. He had not seen these riders approaching.

He stopped and waited. There were three of them, and two were spreading out on either side of the road to prevent his from breaking away. He saw the guns in their hands.

Pulling up, Owen waited grimly, holding the water bag in his hand, making no attempt to go for his own gun. He was not quite sure yet whether these were more Flagge riders coming to finish the job, or Concord Borax men, seeing the burning wagons and heading in to get him, possibly one of the plunderers.

The men on the left side of the road fired a single shot, the slug kicking up dirt a few inches from Owen's right boot. Before he'd been cool, a little amused at the mistake these men were making, but now a red anger flashed through him. The evil temper which had driven him out of a half dozen different towns got the better of him.

He'd been holding the water bag in his right hand; the bag slipped now. Almost before it touched the ground he had his Colt out in the open. His first slug took the horse in the chest as the animal suddenly swerved in toward the road again. The second slug went through the rider's hat as he sailed through the air, kicking his boots clear of the stirrups. The horse went down with a crash.

The second rider on the opposite side of the road pulled up abruptly. He was about twenty-five yards away and he sat on his horse there, gun in hand, the barrel pointing toward the ground.

The third man was coming up fast, and for the first time Owen noticed that he'd been yelling to the two men ahead of him to stop. Owen waited, the gun tight in his right hand, a cold grin on his face. He watched the man who had jumped from his horse climb to his feet slowly. He was a small man, thin-faced, with a long jaw.

He said tersely, "That was damned fancy shootin', friend."

Owen Steele's voice was low, almost soft. He said, "I missed you both times, amigo." He picked up the water bag again and started walking forward toward the wounded man on the ground.

The rider in the middle of the road dismounted and came forward. He was a tall man, very straight, with a thin, pale face and a lined mouth.

He said to the rider who'd had his horse shot, "Vincent, you're a damned fool."

Owen had the wounded man's head up and was trying to pour some water through his clenched lips. He said quietly, "Mister, he was pretty near a dead fool, too."

"Who are you?" the tall man asked grimly.

Owen looked at him. "Shoot first—ask questions later. Is that it?"

The tall man stared at him thoughtfully, and then a slow smile crossed his face. He said, "Sorry, my friend. These are my wagons, and that chap is one of my drivers. I find you with him and the wagons burning. What am I to think?"

"If I'd shot him," Owen observed, "and burned your wagons I'd be a long way from here by now."

The tall man nodded. He bent down beside his driver. He said quietly, "Then did you see who did it?"

"From a quarter of a mile off," Owen said. "They're heading for Braxton City now."

"Some o' Flagge's work," the short man growled. He stood up dusting himself, muttering under his breath.

"Better get this man to town," Owen stated. "He's pretty badly done in."

The tall, sickly man nodded. He said, "Sorry this had to happen. I'm Thornton Blair. Concord Borax is mine. We've been having our troubles and Vincent thought you were a Flagge man."

"Vincent will live longer," Owen said, "if he thinks twice before pulling that gun."

Vincent laughed nervously. The third man had chased after a span of mules which had stopped to chew on some mesquite bushes up the road. He came back with them and they got the driver up on one of them, tying him on as best they could.

Vincent and the third rider rode on either side of the badly wounded driver while Thornton Blair and Owen moved on ahead. Blair said very little. He asked once as they moved through the big boulders, "You new to the valley?"

"Never saw it before," Owen said. "Hot as hell."

Thornton Blair smiled grimly. "It has some virtue," he observed. "It's good for bad lungs."

Owen glanced at him quickly and then looked straight ahead again. It seemed ironic that a sick man should be bucking Christian Flagge, who according to the stories in Mo-have Junction was the toughest operator in the southwest.

"You and Flagge the only borax men in the valley?" Owen asked.

"We are now," Thornton Blair said. "There were five companies. Flagge now owns four of the five."

Owen said nothing. He rubbed his jaw thoughtfully.

"Flagge has brought in hired gunhands—" Blair started to say. He stopped suddenly and looked at Owen quickly.

"Flagge hasn't signed me," Owen said, "yet."

Blair was quiet after that. They passed an incoming outfit, two of the big wagons with the water tank, twenty mule teams dragging them. Blair looked straight ahead as they went past the wagons, and Owen saw the words, FLAGGE BORAX on the sides.

He asked, "Only one road through the valley?"

Blair nodded. "All the borax companies have used this road. It's one hundred and fifty miles long—from the center of the borax marshes in the valley out to Braxton City and the railhead. It was built years ago by the first borax operator in the field. There's been a kind of gentlemen's agreement among the operators that we maintain the road and share it equally. Of course the various companies have maintained their own stations and personnel."

THORNTON BLAIR spoke more about the borax business and Owen listened with interest. The subject seemed to fascinate Blair. He'd made a deep study of the business before going into it. He'd found that only by maintaining rigid schedules could a company show a margin of profit.

"We can run an outfit from Braxton City to the refining plant in the valley and back in twenty days," Blair stated. "When I came to the Valley they were taking thirty and thirty-five days. They were using smaller wagons and only a half dozen teams of mules. We introduced larger wagons and the twenty mule teams, enabling us to bring out as much as forty-five thousand pounds of borax at one haul. Flagge came to the Valley a year and a half ago—I've been here five years."

They were coming into the main street of Braxton now, and Owen studied it with interest. Braxton City was the boomtown for the borax industry. All the borax companies maintained their yards here and shipped on the railroad.

It was a hot city on the edge of the desert, a town without trees, a town with the desert coming right up to the back door, threatening to turn it back into wasteland the moment civilized man relaxed his vigilance.

There were continual awnings running the lengths of both sides of the street, providing some shade, making the town livable during the day. In late afternoon the heat lay here like a stifling blanket, and the dust in the road was eight inches deep.

Dogs lay panting in the shadows of the awnings. Squalid Indians sat with their backs against the walls of buildings, watching the riders coming in, their brown, seamed faces portraying no emotion.

A man came out of the first saloon, looked at them for a moment, at the wounded man tied to the mule, and then went back inside.

Other men came out to look, but no one said anything.

Owen Steele saw something in their faces—a fear he'd never seen in the faces of white men before.

He asked Blair, "This Flagge's town?"

"His crew runs it," Blair admitted slowly. "I'm not proud of that."

They passed the big Flagge yards, and Owen saw the monster wagons lined up along the fence, and the big corrals for the mules. He saw horses tied near the corral, still saddled. A group of men outside the Flagge yards were looking straight at Owen as if sizing him up.

Blair said suddenly, "I hadn't thought about this. You'd better turn off here before this town begins to think you're a hired hand working for me."

"If they want to think that," Owen said, "let them." He did turn off at the next intersection because he spotted a barber shop and he needed a shave and haircut.

Thornton Blair said to him, "Thanks for your help. I'm sorry we had that little trouble."

"I've been closer to a bullet before," Owen smiled. He was dismounting in front of the barber shop when he saw Blair stop outside a building on the next block. He watched the tall man climb down from the saddle and stand there for a moment as if marshaling his strength before walking to the door.

A girl came out of the office door and walked over to him. Blair put an arm around her waist and they walked into the office together. Owen had only a side view of the girl's face, but he looked twice. She was dark-haired, very pretty, trim in her neat brown dress.

Tying the bay to the hitching rack, Owen ducked under it and stepped into the empty shop. The blinds were drawn low to keep out the hot afternoon sun.

Slipping off his gunbelt, he hung it on a hook and then slid the Colt from its holster and tucked it inside his pants belt before sitting down in the chair.

The barber, a short, fat man with a bald head, watched these proceedings nervously. Owen acted instinctively, giving no thought to the matter. He lay back in the chair while the barber put a sheet around his neck, tying it at the back.

When the barber turned the chair so that it faced a mirror on the wall, Owen said quietly, "Keep this damned chair facing the door, friend."

The fat man blinked and hastily complied. He said nervously, "New Concord hand?"

"No," Owen told him. He flashed the fat man a quick glance and read the disbelief in his eyes. He smiled faintly, knowing then

that he was already tagged. He'd ridden into Braxton City with Blair and that made him Blair's man no matter how many times he tried to deny it.

He asked, "Blair have a woman working for him?"

"Niece," the barber said. "He came out here five years ago, looking for a place to lay down and die. Lung trouble. She came with him, to nurse him, I reckon."

Owen watched two men coming out of a saloon across the way. They stood on the walk, staring at the barber shop for several moments. Other men were coming out of stores and saloons on that side of the street, coming out hesitantly, looking at each other, looking at the two men standing on the edge of the walk.

CHAPTER TWO

Fight Till the Moon Comes Out

FACING the window with the shade still drawn low, Owen could see them, but they could not see him. One man was tall, gangling, red-haired, with a hooked nose. He had a nervous habit of twitching his shoulders and then rubbing his hands on his trouser legs.

The second man was shorter, stocky, a thin, hatchet-faced, with a mole on his left cheek. Both were rolling cigarettes ostentatiously, thoroughly enjoying the little drama in which they were about to take part.

A grim, sardonic smile slid across Owen Steele's face. He did not despise hired gunhands—men who made their living because of the threat of the big gun hanging on their hips. Sometimes they were necessary. A man like Thornton Blair needed them desperately at this moment, because there was no law in this desert town and he probably could not handle a gun himself. But a gunhand who enjoyed his work was something else again.

Owen watched the red-haired man with the hooked nose, wondering whether Flagge himself had sent them out. He was aware of the fact that in a town of this size, with every man, woman and child in the town knowing of the deadly duel going on between Concord and Flagge Borax, the entrance of a single stranger would be news. He had been seen and the report undoubtedly taken to Flagge.

The fat barber had spotted the two men, also. He stopped talking very suddenly, his scissors raised in the air. Owen saw the sweat break out on his face as the two men stepped into the road and started across the street.

They stopped halfway over to let a carriage pass before them. The red-haired man threw away his cigarette, which he'd just started to smoke. The smaller man with the mole had his quirky tilted toward the sky. He entered

the shop first, and Owen heard a bell tingle in the back of the building.

Sitting in the chair, facing the door, Owen had slid the six-gun out of his belt when the two men took their first step into the road. He held it in his hand under the white apron now, and he was looking straight at the two men as they came into the shop and closed the door behind them.

The little man with the mole, evidently the leader of the two, looked at Owen, at the gun-belt dangling from the peg on the wall, at the empty holster, and then at Owen's black, flat-crowned hat on the shelf above the peg.

The redhead was grinning, hitching his shoulders, leaning back against the door.

The barber said timidly, "Hello, boys."

"About finished, George?" the little man asked.

"I—I just started," George muttered. "You boys sit down. Be with you in a minute."

"Get him up, George," the little man said.

Owen Steele grinned at him, but said nothing. He heard the fat barber swallowing noisily.

"Now, Tate," he mumbled. "I don't want any trouble in this shop." He was looking at Owen appealingly.

Owen said, "Who's this monkey, George?"

Tate reddened under his tan, and the red-haired man at the door stared, open-mouthed.

Tate said, "You a Blair rider, friend?" He came over and stood close by.

"No," Owen told him.

"You're a yellow liar," Tate said.

Owen's right boot shot out, catching Tate full in the stomach, taking the breath from him. He staggered back into the corner by the door, nearly falling. His mouth was open.

Even before he got his breath back, his right hand was snaking down toward the gun on his hip. Owen shot him through the right shoulder, firing through the sheet thrown across him. He put a second shot through the glass door, inches away from the redhead's neck, and the shattering glass cut the latter's cheek as he bounced away from the door.

Tate slumped to the floor, his gun only half out of the holster. With his free hand, Owen calmly slapped out the little fire around the bullet holes in the sheet. He said to the redhead,

"Get the hell out of here—both of you."

The red-headed man stared at him, mouth working spasmodically. He had not even gone for his gun. He wanted to say something, didn't quite know what to say, and shut his mouth again.

Tate was looking at Owen, hatred in his small, pale blue eyes. He struggled to a standing position, but he was very weak. Blood was trickling from his fingertips, making a small puddle on the floor.

He said tersely, "You're pretty rough, friend."

"Tell your boss," Owen smiled, "to come around himself."

"I might do that," Tate said. He staggered as he stepped to the door, and the red-headed man caught him and held him up. Tate had to be helped out of the door, and Owen sat in the chair watching them cross the street to the saloon from which they'd come. The crowd gaped at them.

Owen clicked out the empty shells from his Colt gun and they fell to the wooden floor with a metallic ring. He asked the fat man, "You cutting hair or posing for pictures?"

O WEN got up from the chair fifteen minutes later, paid his bill and walked over to the peg to pick up the gunbelt. It was then that he saw the man standing on the walk outside—a short man, tremendously wide in the shoulders, with legs like the trunks of trees. Owen could not see his face without bending down to look under the shade.

The barber said slowly, "Flagge's here, friend."

Owen adjusted his hat. Looking down he saw the big gun on Flagge's hip. Flagge had tremendous hands, hanging low at his sides. They were thick-fingered hands, nearly again as wide across the palms as the hands of an average man.

Flagge walked back off the walk to the hitching rack where Owen's bay was standing. He turned and leaned back against the rack, placing both elbows over the bar.

Owen put a hand on the door knob and looked through the glass, straight down at Christian Flagge. The king of Death Valley had a wide face to match his body. It was a hard, pitiless face, with tremendous strength in the jaw line. He had a wide mouth, turned down at the corners—a ruthless mouth, thin-lipped.

His eyes were gray, wide-set, eyes which Owen could not imagine ever showing any mirth or humor. They were unblinking eyes, crinkled at the corners from looking into the sun.

Owen stepped out on the walk, rubbing his newly-shaven face. He stood there for a moment, looking up and down the street. There were at least a hundred people out in the open now, where he hadn't seen more than half a dozen when he rode in with Thornton Blair earlier in the afternoon. They were all looking in his direction, watching him, watching Christian Flagge standing by the tie rack.

The door of the Concord office opened farther down the street, and Thornton Blair stepped out, a worried expression on his face. He started up the walk, and then Owen saw

the girl come out also and look in his direction. He walked out to the edge of the boardwalk and stepped into the dirt. He came up to within two paces of Flagge and stopped.

Flagge spoke in a hard, metallic voice. He said, "I understand you just shot up one of my boys."

Owen nodded. "Reckon you should have sent a better man, Flagge. I don't take rough talk from any man in the world."

"You told me to come around myself," Flagge went on coldly. "Is that right?"

"I like to see a man do his own dirty work," Owen told him, "if he has the guts to do it."

Flagge's gray eyes flickered. He said, "For a new man in this town you have a quick tongue and a nasty one. That won't get you anywhere in the valley."

"Depends on what I came for," Owen smiled.

"You came to work for Thornton Blair," Flagge stated, "as a hired gunhand."

Owen's smile broadened.

"Didn't you? Flagge persisted.

"No," Owen said.

Flagge's words were clear and distinct, uttered slowly. He said, repeating exactly the words Tate had uttered, "You're a yellow liar."

The smile left Owen's face. He heard Thornton Blair say behind him, "He's speaking the truth, Flagge. We met him back on the road. Im not hiring gunhands."

"He's a yellow liar," Christian Flagge repeated slowly.

Owen stepped forward, slipping his hat off with his left hand. He slashed the hat full across Flagge's broad face. Then he stepped back, the hat still in the left hand, his right hand hanging at his side, close to the butt of the gun.

There was a moment of stunned silence. Christian Flagge hadn't moved from his position. He was turning white with anger, and the devil came into his eyes—the devil that lurked in his soul.

Owen Steele was waiting for him coolly—waiting to match his draw when the roof fell in on him. He saw Flagge's eyes shift for a fraction of a second to a point to his own right and behind him. Flagge's mouth opened. He snapped, "No."

It was too late.

Something crashed against the back of Owen's head, knocking him forward toward Flagge. He tried to hold himself up, but his head was reeling, and the ground came up very suddenly toward his face. He caught a glimpse of Flagge's solid legs in front of him as he went down.

He didn't know how long he stayed down. His vision cleared and he was trying to get up with no strength in his arms and legs. He

didn't see Flagge in front of him, but he was still lying just in front of the tie rack where he'd fallen. A crowd of men lined the walk on the opposite side of the street, watching him silently. He had the feeling that a very brief period of time had elapsed while he was unconscious—possibly less than a minute. He managed to sit up and look around, trying to focus his eyes on the objects around him. The men across the street seemed to be con-

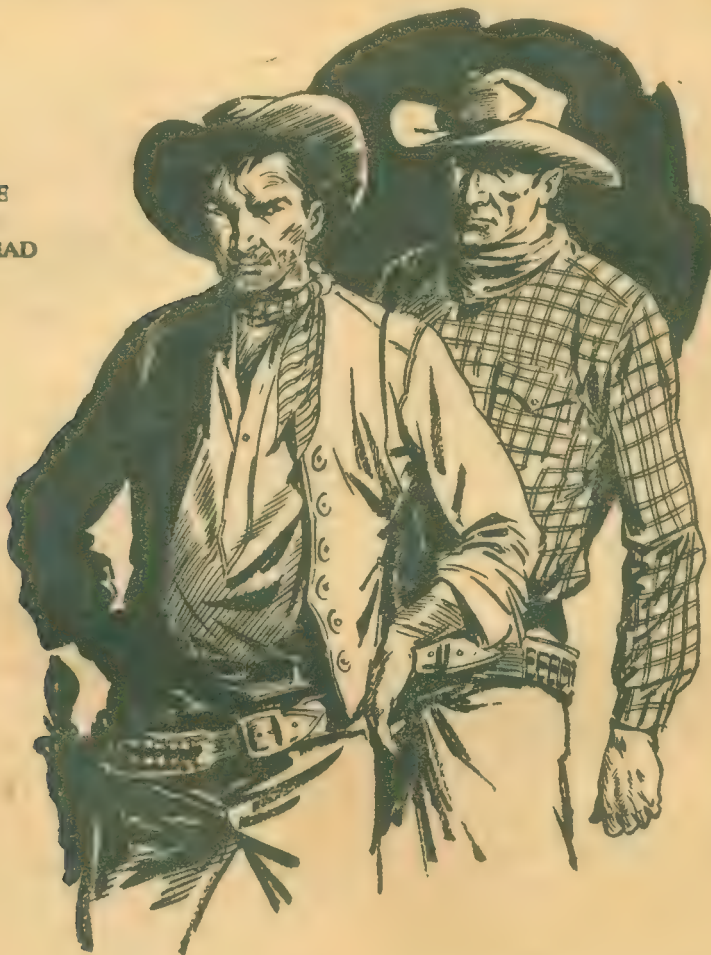
Owen now. He said quietly, "You feel as if you can walk now?"

Owen tried to grin at him. His head was pounding again, the pain causing him to shut his eyes. He said, "What in hell hit me?"

"One of Flagge's men came up behind you," Blair said. "He knocked you down with the barrel of his gun."

Owen turned his head to look at the girl again. She was standing very stiffly, her face

TATE
and
REDHEAD



stantly shifting positions. Even the buildings were whirling.

He located Flagge up on the walk now, watching him coldly, and then he saw something else—something which nearly brought him to his senses. A girl was standing on the walk less than ten yards from Flagge. She held a heavy shotgun in her hands, and the shotgun was trained on Flagge. The girl was Thornton Blair's niece.

Blair himself was kneeling down beside

white with anger. He liked the shape of her mouth. He said to Blair, "What goes here?"

"Flagge was waiting for you to get up to finish you off," Blair said. "Nancy saw the whole thing up the street. She came down with the shotgun to stop Flagge."

Owen staggered to his feet. He stood there swaying, waiting for his head to clear. His knees started to buckle and Blair caught him, holding him up.

"Call your girl off," Owen mumbled.

"Don't be a fool," Blair said. "You're in no condition to face anybody—let alone Flagge."

Owen grimaced. He went up on the walk with Blair and stood there, looking at Flagge, grinning at him. He said, "I'll be around, Flagge, any time you want to see me."

"You'd better be around," Flagge told him slowly. "If you go away I'll follow you. I'll follow you to the end of the earth."

Owen saw the pride in the man then, and it was an evil thing, a quality in Christian Flagge which dominated all else, and which had to be appeased. He'd been publicly insulted before the townsmen of Braxton City, and he would never rest until he'd repaid the insult with blood.

"You won't have to go far," Owen smiled at him. "You're a big fish in this pond, Flagge, but its a damned small pond. Remember that."

He turned away then and he looked at Nancy Blair standing a few feet away. She'd lowered the barrel of the shotgun.

He said to her. "You'll pardon the rough language, ma'am, and thanks for the help."

Thornton Blair said before the girl could speak. "Stop at our place until you feel better, Steele. I feel I'm responsible for much of your troubles this afternoon."

Owen heard Flagge walking away—walking through the silent crowd, looking at no one. He turned in at one of the saloons. Another wave of dizziness swept over Owen, and he reached for one of the wooden awning uprights to support himself.

THORNTON BLAIR took his arm and led him down the street to his office. He sat down in a chair Blair pushed toward him. It was fairly cool inside. Looking out one of the windows Owen could see the giant wagons in the yard. He counted eight of them.

He said to Blair, "You must have a lot of those big fellows on the road."

"None," Blair said grimly. "The outfit you saw burned was the only outfit we had on the road. I'm short on drivers; the kind of treatment they've been getting by Flagge's toughs on the road makes it impossible for me to keep a man long."

"I used to handle a stagecoach," Owen observed. "Reckon I could handle those big wagons of yours."

Blair stared at him. "You want to work for me after what happened this afternoon?"

"You heard what Flagge said," Owen grinned. "I don't mean to run, and if I can get some support here I might just as well take it. He has a whole outfit against me."

"You won't get much support from Concord," Blair told him. "I haven't any gun-

hands. I'd rather pull out than start a bloody war."

"I'm hiring out as driver," Owen said.

Blair frowned. "I'll hire you as that." He sat down behind his desk, and Owen noticed that his color was very bad. There was a peculiar luster in his eyes.

Nancy Blair came back into the room from the outer office. She said, "Uncle, I think you'd better go home for the day, also. You're not looking well. You've been worrying too much again."

Blair smiled and got up. He said to Owen, "Be around in the morning. We'll see if we can make up an outfit for you to take into the valley. I'll have to put an armed guard on the wagon with you, even if it means sending out only one wagon every two days."

Owen nodded. "We'll worry about it in the morning," he said.

When the older man went out, Owen walked to a bucket and got himself a drink of water. When he came back Nancy was watching him.

She asked, "What brought you to Death Valley, Mr.—"

"Steele," Owen said. "I drifted in. Curious to see what borax looked like."

"It was good for my uncle," the girl said, "before Mr. Flagge came to the Valley. He was making money and it made him happy just to be working at something. You could see his health improving. Now he's losing all he's gained—and his money, too."

"I'd say," Owen said thoughtfully, "that Flagge would be a pretty tough man to buck even for a well man."

"He—he's terrible!"

"He's a little worse than that," Owen observed. "He's hell on wheels—if you'll pardon the language."

He went out in the yard to look at the big wagons at close range, and found Vincent sitting in the shade of one of the wagonsheds, whittling at a stick.

The Concord hand said, "You must be a hell of a fast man with a gun, my friend, or else you don't care how long you live."

"Trouble with you boys," Owen observed, "is that you let Flagge step on you from the beginning. He thinks no one can stand up against him now. He thinks he's a small god."

Vincent nodded. "Wait'll you've been in the valley a while, mister. You'll see what I mean. Maybe it's the heat; maybe it's something else. Flagge just looks at a man an' he don't feel like fighting any more."

"I'll fight him all day," Owen said. "I'll fight him till the moon comes out."

Vincent whittled on his stick for a while in silence. He said then, "This outfit needs a gent like you, no matter how little you last."

"I figure on driving a wagon into the Valley

tomorrow," Owen said. "Blair just signed me on. You want a ride?"

Vincent put the knife away. He was grinning. He said, "After what I seen you do to Christian Flagge this afternoon, my friend, I'd rather ride with you than the king of England."

A rider was coming through the gates, riding very fast. He slid out of the saddle in front of Vincent and he said jerkily, "Mr. Blair in?"

"What's the excitement, Jim?" Vincent asked him.

"Flagge's thrown a block across the road out past our Salt Hill Station. He has a half dozen armed guards behind the block an' he aims to keep Concord wagons off the road."

Vincent put his knife away and stood up. He looked at Owen grimly. "Been expecting that for weeks," he said. "Flagge finally did it."

"What kind of road block?" Owen asked the man.

Jim looked at him and then at Vincent.

"This fellow, Vincent said," just slapped Flagge across the face with his hat. He works for us. Talk to him."

"Road dips down between some big boulders," Jim said, "five miles out past Salt Hill Station where I'm at. Flagge put up a pair of big log gates. I watched him through a field glass."

"We'll go in and see Miss Blair," Vincent scowled. "Reckon our little ride into the Valley will be postponed."

"Flagge have any right to block the road?" Owen asked.

"He makes his own rights," Vincent observed. "Reckon he'll claim he bought the road from the original owner and he has his right to keep off trespassers."

"No other way to reach our refining plant in the Valley?" Owen wanted to know.

"Only one graded road through the valley," Vincent told him. "It'd take a small fortune to build another one, and you can't run these big wagons on sand. They'd go in up to the hubs."

"Only other way," Owen said, "is to knock down that road block."

Jim, the Salt Hill Station man, was walking up ahead. He turned and looked back at Owen queerly.

"He means that," Vincent said soberly.

CHAPTER THREE

Gunsmoke Castle

NANCY BLAIR listened to the new trouble in dismayed indignation. She looked at Owen and said, "He—he—"

"He's terrible," Owen finished soberly.

"It means the end of Concord Borax," Vincent observed. "You or Blair ain't got the money to run through another road, and a couple of weeks with no borax coming out of the Valley will ruin him."

"In 'his present condition," the girl said quietly, "I even hate to tell him about."

"Then don't tell him," Owen advised. "The matter might be cleared up by that time."

"What—what do you mean?" Nancy asked him.

"I'm taking an outfit into the valley tomorrow," Owen said, "gate or not gate."

"You mean you'll fight?" the girl asked.

"Don't figure on running away," Owen smiled. "How many boys can I count on beside yourself, Vincent?"

The little man shrugged. "Not many of 'em like to run up against Flagge's gunhands," he said. "Jim here might go along, and maybe Ed Savage, the blacksmith."

"Should be enough," Owen nodded. "How about it, Jim?"

The station man rubbed his chin and looked at Owen steadily. "Kind o' like to get back at Flagge's bunch for once," he admitted. "They been pushin' us pretty hard."

"You'll get your chance tomorrow," Owen said. He turned to Vincent, "Have your outfit ready by seven in the morning," he said. "Bring along rifles and a few shotguns."

"You're the boss," Vincent told him and Owen grinned at the man. He was not surprised to find himself giving orders to Concord employees. He was not running borax out of Death Valley; he was breaking a road block. The borax meant nothing.

He said quietly, "Vincent, we'll get along. I'm kind of glad now that I missed you with those two shots back in the Valley."

"Reckon I'm even gladder," Vincent said laconically.

When Vincent and George went out, Nancy Blair said to Owen, worry in her eyes, "What kind of work did you do, Mr. Steele, before you come to the Valley?"

"Some of this," Owen said, "and some of that. I never let anybody push me around." He had the wildness in his eyes then and he could see that she saw it, and for once he was not proud of that red temper.

He remembered as a boy of fourteen walking down the street with a gun on his hip, his first gun. He'd been a wild kid with no parents; he'd been raised in the back of a saloon in a tough railbed town. The patrons of the saloon had egged him on in his savage encounters with other town boys. He'd been encouraged to be tough and he'd discovered that toughness sometimes was enough in itself to win battles. A man had laughed at him, swinging that gun, strutting. Owen had shot him through the shoulder, and after that he'd stopped fight-

ing with his fists, but the temper was still there always very close to the surface, concealed by a cold grin.

"I don't like to see anyone killed," Nancy Blair said slowly, "and I know uncle doesn't either."

"There'll be no one killed," Owen told her, "if Flagge takes down the block."

It was six o'clock in the evening when he registered at the Sherwin Hotel, a few doors from the Concord yard. He was eating alone in the hotel dining room, when Vincent came in and strode to his table, sitting down without a word.

"What's on your mind?" Owen asked him.

"Been thinkin'," Vincent said. "We're makin' plans for tomorrow, and Flagge is set to get you tonight. You're one man against the whole Flagge outfit. Thought maybe I'd stick around with you."

Owen looked at him. He said quietly, "You're all right, Vincent. Never had anybody say that before who wasn't paid for his work."

The small man grinned. "Maybe I'm thinkin' only about Concord Borax," he said, "and maybe you're not as tough as you think you are, Steele. I like your kind."

"Where does Flagge hang out at night?" Owen asked. He lighted a cigarette and leaned back in his chair.

"Reckon you can find him in the Emperor Saloon," Vincent said, "so that's a place to stay away from."

"I'll be upstairs," Owen said. "Look in at the Emperor every once in a while. When Flagge shows up you come and tell me."

"Why?" Vincent asked grimly.

"I might like to have a drink with him," Owen smiled. He kicked back his chair, nodded to Vincent, and walked toward the stairs.

From force of habit, in his room, he pushed a chair up against the door, tucking the rim of it under the door knob, tilting the chair back. He pulled down the blinds and lay on the bed, placing his gunbelt on the bed beside him. He was tired because he'd been up before sunrise and had ridden a long way to reach the valley.

It was past seven o'clock in the evening and the sun was a red ball on the floor of the valley. It was dark in the room when Owen awoke to hear someone knocking on the door.

He got up immediately, strapped on the belt, and walked to the door. He said, "Vincent?"

"Right."

Lighting the lamp, Owen opened the door and the Concord hand stepped inside. He looked at Owen's tousled hair and he said,

"Don't tell me you've been sleepin'?"

"What time is it?" Owen asked him.

"Nearly ten o'clock," Vincent said.

"Flagge's in the Emperor now. That red-headed dog, Teeler Quinn, is with him, and a couple of other Flagge hands."

Owen poured water into a basin and washed his face. The water was lukewarm from lying in the pitcher all day.

Vincent said, "What in hell you figure on doin', Steele?"

"We'll have a drink in the Emperor," Owen told him.

The little man sat down on a chair and shook his head. "I don't get you," he said.

Owen smiled. He reached for his hat and opened the door and went down the stairs with Vincent behind him. He crossed the street and walked quickly toward the Emperor, Vincent at his side. He saw a man outside on the saloon porch step quickly through the batwing doors.

"Flagge's had a man watchin' the hotel," Vincent said. "He's been waitin' for you to come out."

Owen didn't say anything. He was whistling softly as he approached the Emperor. Several men had come outside on the porch, and he saw surprise in their faces when he came up the steps and walked through them, Vincent still behind him.

There was a crowd in the Emperor, but Christian Flagge stood alone at one end of the bar, his back toward Owen, his tremendously broad shoulders very stiff. He could see Owen in the bar mirror and he turned around slowly as Owen approached.

Owen could see the surprise in the short man's gray eyes—surprise and some respect. And then the trunk died away in the Emperor until only a drunk was babbling in a corner, and he stopped when someone rapped him sharply on the back of the head. There was a slushing sound from the far end of the bar where one of the five bartenders was washing glasses. That, too, stopped.

Owen said, "Flagge, you had one of your dogs work on me from behind this afternoon."

"That's a lie," Flagge said. "I've already chased that man out of the valley for intervening." He laughed coldly, and he added, "You should thank him for saving your damned life."

"You also called me a yellow liar," Owen went on coolly, "which I never took from any man in the world."

"You'll take it from me," Flagge snapped, and Owen could see something in the depths of those steely gray eyes, a kind of bewilderment that a man should even talk like that to him. For the first time in his life Flagge's gigantic composure was shaken. He was not sure of himself.

Owen stood about two feet away from him, hands on his hips, smiling. He was taller than Flagge, very loose.

He said softly, "I wouldn't take it from the devil, Flagge."

He was moving his right hand even as he spoke, moving it with tremendous speed, and he was faster than Flagge only because Flagge was not expecting a draw so quickly.

A man yelled somewhere behind Owen's gun cleared the holster. Flagge's heavy pearl-handled Colt was halfway out of the leather when Owen swung the barrel of his six-gun, crashing it down across Flagge's hat.

The squat man sagged at the bar, spun half around, caught at the rim, and dragged himself up again. He was still lifting his gun out of the holster, although half-conscious, when Owen hit him again. He went down this time, sprawling in the sawdust at Owen's feet, his gun in the clear, but useless.

Owen stepped back, and in the moment of stunned silence which followed he heard the metallic click of a gun hammer, and then Vincent's drawing voice from the wall behind him.

"Anybody figures to call this gent's cards will remember he's Concord an' I'm Concord."

Owen moved back a few more steps, sliding the gun back into the holster. He spotted the redhead who had been in the barber shop this afternoon. The redhead had been sitting at a card table about fifteen feet away. He was standing up now, lips twisted in a snarl, and his right hand was on his gun.

Owen started to walk toward him slowly, grinning, the devil smiling out of his eyes.

He asked, "You want some of that Red?"

Teeler Quinn pushed back his chair and stood up. There were other Flagge men here, but Owen could not identify them, scattered in the crowd. He kept walking forward one step at a time, covering the few feet between himself and Quinn.

The redhead snarled, "You're not so tough, mister." He stepped back and held his ground stubbornly, but uncertainly. He'd taken his hand from his gun, but it was still very close to the butt.

"All you Flagge hands," Owen laughed disdainfully, "big on the talk, slow on the draw." He was up to Quinn now, and he reached out with his left hand, placing the palm full in Quinn's face. He pushed hard, shoving the readhead back against the wall, nearly knocking him from his feet.

"Damn you!" Quinn half screamed, but the fight was out of him and he was broken. He stood there against the wall, trembling with futile rage, fear in his green eyes.

Owen laughed and turned his back full on the man as he walked toward the door. Flagge still lay on the floor, arms spread, his face turned in toward the bar.

Nodding to Vincent, Owen walked out through the door, the little man after him.

He could hear Vincent breathing heavily. They walked back up the street in the direction of the hotel, and they were nearly there when Vincent spoke.

He said, "Hell."

"What's the matter?" Owen asked him.

"I'm ten years older," Vincent said, "than I was ten minutes ago."

IT WAS still dark when Owen arrived at the Concord yards in the morning. Vincent, and George Sellman, the Salt Hill Station man, were hooking the mule team on the long chain. A water tank was being filled from the well near the wagonshed.

A heavy set man with a lantern came out of the shed, looked at Owen and grinned, flashing white teeth.

"Ed Savage," Vincent said, "our blacksmith. He wants a crack at Flagge."

"He'll get it," Owen promised. "How soon can we start?"

"Fifteen minutes," Vincent told him. "We should be out at the Salt Hill Station by ten o'clock, and George says the road block is a short way beyond the station."

"How about the guns?" Owens asked him.

"Two shotguns," Vincent grinned. "Forty rifles, plenty of ammunition up in the lead wagon." He asked, "How do we do it, Steele?"

"You ride one of the wheelers," Owen said. "I'll be up on the seat. Ed and George can hide inside the wagon. When we reach that block let me do the talking."

Vincent chuckled, "I kind of like your way of talking, Steele."

"They tell me," George Sellman grinned, "that Flagge still has a bad headache from last night."

Owen saw the light in the office window then and walked that way. Nancy Blair was standing in the doorway, looking at the outfit being made up.

He said, "You're in early, ma'am."

"I wanted to see you go out," the girl said. "I heard about the trouble last night with Flagge."

"I was paying him what I owed," Owen told her innocently. "Now we're square."

"Now you're only beginning with him," Nancy said worriedly. "I wish there were a way to negotiate with Flagge, but he refuses even to talk with Mr. Blair. He assumes that everything he does is right and no one else has a say in the matter."

"He'll talk with him," Owen smiled. "Unless he's all done with talking for good."

"I hope you get back," the girl told him.

"I expect to get back," Owen said, "or I wouldn't be going." He called back over his shoulder as he walked away. "Don't worry about me." He was thinking that that was a

strange request from himself—no one had ever worried about him before.

He went up on the seat and Vincent rode one of the wheel mules in front of him. Sellman and Savage climbed up into the wagon, dropping down to the bed. The empty wagons rattled out of the yard just as the first yellow light came into the sky.

It was fairly cool as they left the town and hit the graded road into the valley. Behind them Owen could hear the chugging of a locomotive rolling in from the east. The whistle blew a hole in the silence of the morning.

A jerkline ran out of the leaders, and there was a jockey stick between their heads. Owen handled the line without any trouble. The mules kept to the road, beautifully trained for their work. The heavy wagons moved at a good pace.

As the sun crept over the horizon on the other side of the ridge of purple mountains to the east, Owen felt the heat come into the air. He watched a number of kangaroo rats scurrying through the mesquite trees. A flight of crows sailed across the alkali flats, and these were the only living creatures in this valley of desolation.

The white mountain of sand were hard on the eyes in places and the dried salt marshes shimmered in the distance. The heat came in dry, burning waves as they moved through the boulder strewn pass where Owen had seen the Flagge riders waiting. They went by the charred ruins of the two wagons Flagge had had burned up. Vincent looked at them and then back to Owen. He didn't say anything.

They paused at a water hole just beyond this point, and the animals were permitted to drink. There was another graded road which swung off to the south here, leading up over a high sand dune. An old prospector, leading a burro, came down this road, waved to them and pulled up at the water hole.

Owen asked, "Where does that road go, Vincent?"

"Take a walk up to the top of that dune," Vincent scowled, "and you'll see it."

"The pearl o' the valley," the old prospector chuckled, with a toothy grin, "sittin' there like a princess just wakened up, with the kangaroo rats runnin' over her lap an' the crows makin' nests in her hair."

Owen stared at the old man and walked up the road, Vincent following him. He walked to the top of the dune and he looked down into a long narrow defile, lined on either side with red and purple rocks. The graded road twisted down into the defile, down to a sandy floor of creamy white.

The castle bloomed from the desert floor, indescribably beautiful in pink and white stone,

a half dozen tapering spires etched against the intense blue of the sky. The windows looked out across the valley—across dried up salt marshes, hills of white sand, scattered boulder fields. There was no glass in the windows. They were empty eyes.

Piles of rubble lay about in the vast courtyard, brick, lumber, building sand. There were no workmen, no signs of life. A crow took off from one of the spires, cawing dismally as it flapped high over Owen's head.

"Flagge's?" Owen asked.

"Flagge's," Vincent said. "Never finished it. He stopped work on it six months ago and there she lays. Maybe he got sick of it; maybe he changed his mind and maybe he ran out of money. Nobody knows and Flagge don't talk. Nobody knows why he built a castle in this forsaken spot, but there she is."

"An' there she'll be," the old prospector chuckled behind them. "There she'll be for a thousand years, maybe fer ten thousand years, an' I slept in the master bedroom last night. I wish my old mother was alive so that I could tell her that Old Ned slept in the king's castle, an' his dog-eared mule slept in the best guest room in the place."

"Go away, old man," Vincent grinned at him.

"An' I made my breakfast in the fireplace," the prospector went on glibly, "a fireplace so damned big a man could walk around in it an' feel at home."

Owen Steele stared at the castle for some moments in silence, and then turned and walked down the hill.

"A strange man," Vincent said. "No reason at all for building this place."

"A king," the old prospector stated blandly, "don't need reasons for nothin'. He just does things an' there they are. Flagge's a king."

"And you're an old fool," Vincent said.

O WEN climbed up on the seat again started the mules moving along the road. Ed Savage, the blacksmith, said from the wagon, "What do you make of it, Steele?"

"It's over my head," Owen said.

The reached the Salt Hill Station at nine-thirty in the morning. The attendant there looked at them curiously as they stopped again to water the mules.

He asked, "Goin' through?"

"We aim to," Sellman nodded. He looked at Owen.

"How many men would you say they have at the road block?" Owen asked.

"Six when I saw 'em," Sellman said.

"We'll go right up to the gate," Owen said. "We'll see what they have to say."

"They'll be sayin' it with lead," the attendant told him grimly. "Them boys Flagge

hired ain't out there fer their own pleasure."

"Neither is he," Vincent said, nodding toward Owen.

"Let's ride," Owen said. He went back up on the seat and turned the mules out on the road again.

The valley floor dipped beyond the Salt Hill Station, dropping to the lowest point below sea level. The heat seemed to hang here, thick and heavy, where before it had been coming in waves. There were no mesquite trees here, and no greasewood, only the white sand and the bleached stones, painful to the eyes in the glare of the sun.

They came out of the first dip, rolled up among some huge boulders and then started down again through a narrow pass through a boulder field. At the bottom of the pass Owen saw the road block, a heavy wooden picket gate stretched across the road, suspended from a pole. There were lean-tos on either side of the road, giving some shade to Flagge's gunhands guarding the gate.

There was no room below to turn off the road because of the boulders on either side. Owen called back over his shoulder,

"You boys stay out of sight until I need you. Keep the shotguns handy. They won't like greeners."

"Never knew a man did like 'em," Ed Savage grinned.

The big wagons swept down the grade, and Owen watched the men coming out from under the lean-tos. They moved around in front of the gate and waited there.

Vincent said softly, "This is it, Steele."

The two lead mules pulled up in front of the gate. The six grinning men stared up at Owen and Vincent. Owen called cheerfully, "Open her up, boys."

"Like hell," one man said. He was evidently the leader, a sandy-haired, hawk-faced man with a mustache. He stood just to the right of the lead mules, his hands on his hips, watching Owen. He packed a Colt gun on his hip.

"You have authority?" Owen asked him "to block up this road."

The sandy-haired man grinned and patted the gun. "Reckon that's enough, mister," he said. "Turn then damn mules around 'an head 'em home." He added, "If you want to argue, argue with Flagge."

"I'll argue with you first," Owen said softly. "Open that gate."

The sandy-haired man stared at him curiously. "You plumb loco?" he asked. "There's six of us here an' two o' you. We'll shoot the hell out of you."

"You'll be dead," Owen told him quietly, "before the other boys can draw on me. What good will Flagge's money do you then?"

Vincent spoke up from the back of the

wheeler mule then. He said, "Mister, this is the gent slapped Flagge in the face with his hat, and then knocked him down with a gun barrel in the Emperor Saloon last night. You hear about that?"

The sandy-haired man had heard about it. He moistened his thin lips, and Owen saw the uncertainty come into his eyes.

"He put a bullet through Tate Hemsley's shoulder," Vincent went on sardonically, "and then he made Teeler Quinn crawl like a whipped dog. You hear about that, friend?"

"I'm not Hemsley," the sandy-haired man muttered, "an' I'm not Quinn."

"You're not Flagge either," Owen said coolly, "and you'll be a dead whatever-you-are in thirty seconds, if you're not smart."

Owen Steele grinned from the seat. He watched the gunhand closely, noting the shades of emotion slipping across his lean face. He was a little afraid and a little uncertain, but he was thinking of Flagge, too, knowing what Flagge had in store for him if he opened the gate.

And then his mind was made up. Owen Steele noticed it regretfully.

The sandy-haired man turned as if to speak to one of the men with him, and then he whirled around, his right hand moving very fast, dipping down, coming up. His gun was up above the heads of the mules when Owen's first slug hit him squarely in the chest, knocking him back against the post on which the door hung.

Ed Savage and George Hellman suddenly popped up over the rim of the big lead wagon, shotguns leveled on the remaining men. Vincent's Colt was in his hand, waiting for the first move.

The five men in front of the gate blinked in amazement. One man had his gun half out of the holster when Owen's voice reached him.

"Put it back," Owen said, "if you want to eat your supper tonight."

The gun slid back into the holster. Owen said tersely, "Unbuckle the gunbelts and let them fall."

The five gun men looked at the two shotguns trained on them, and then at the sandy-haired man huddled at the foot of the post. Their gunbelts dropped to the ground.

"You have your horses," Owen said, "ride the hell out of the valley. You know what you'll get if Flagge runs into you."

He watched them walk to their horses tied behind the lean-tos. They mounted silently and rode away—away from Braxton City.

"They're finished in the valley," Vincent said as he climbed down from the mule. "You want to head right through to the refining plant with this outfit?"

"No," Owen told him. "Tear down this gate. You boys take the wagons through. I'm

heading back for Braxton City. See you there."

"Braxton City?" Vincent murmured.

"There's a man looking for me," Owen said. "Figured I'd like to meet him."

"You might meet more than one," Vincent said. "Two guns are better than one against a half dozen."

"He won't come with a half dozen," Owen said. "He'll want to finish it alone. He's like that."

"He has his pride," Vincent agreed. He held out his hand. He said, "Good luck, Steele."

Owen shook the little man's hand. "Glad I didn't kill you, Vincent," he said.

"Sure," Vincent agreed. "It was nice."

Owen watched them as they went to work on the gate, demolishing it. He turned the bay horse then and he rode back along the road in the direction of Braxton City.

When he passed the Salt Hill Station he said to the attendant, waiting by the stone hut, "Wagons are going through."

He rode on, leaving the man staring after him.

WHEN he reached the waterhole at the turn-off to Flagge's castle, he pulled up for a drink. It was high noon now, the hottest part of the day, and he could feel it as he squatted down to fill his water canteen. He took a long drink and then straightened up. He stared up the grade to the direction of Flagge's castle and then, instead of riding toward Braxton City he walked the bay up the cut-off and stopped to look down at the castle.

The huge mass seemed to shimmer in the heat waves. Crows fluttered around one of the spires, and a kangaroo rat crawled over a pile of sun-bleached lumber.

Out of curiosity Owen walked down the graded road toward the castle, leading the bay. It was about a hundred yards down the slope to the bottom of the defile. He walked around the piles of lumber and masonry toward a wide entranceway. No doors and no windows had as yet been inserted, and it seemed cool inside the yawning entrance, large enough for a borax wagon to be driven through.

He stood inside the entrance, looking into a vast reception room, unfinished, with only the first floor laid, and rough plaster on the walls. A circular iron staircase wound up to the upper floors.

Beyond the reception room was another, which could have been meant for a huge dining room. Owen could see the fireplace at one end, high enough and wide enough for a man to walk around in as the old prospector had said.

Before going inside, he turned around to

look up the slope, and it was then that he saw the three riders, sitting motionless on top of the hill, watching him. One of them rode a big black, and he was short and very broad in the saddle.

The rider on the left had his arm in a sling, and even at the distance Owen could make him out as Tate Hemsley, the man he'd shot in the barber shop the previous afternoon.

The red-headed Teeler Quinn was the second man, and the man in the middle was Christian Flagge. Owen Steele leaned back against the stone entranceway, hooked his hands in his gunbelt and waited.

Flagge said something to the two men with him and then started down the slope. He was halfway down when Owen saw Quinn and Hemsley dismount and start down on foot, spreading out on either side, clambering over sand hills.

Flagge came down the road leisurely, not looking behind him, and Owen smiled, watching the two hired gun hands. Quinn and Hemsley wanted to be in on this killing because they hated him, but Flagge had given them orders to stay behind. They were backing up. Flagge's play without his knowing about it now, ready to open up while Owen was busy shooting it out with Flagge.

The rider on the black horse dismounted less than thirty yards from Owen, tied his horse near a pile of lumber, and then came forward on foot. Quinn and Hemsley were at the bottom of the defile also, coming in behind huge piles of yellow building sand.

Owen watched them thoughtfully for a moment and then stepped back into the building. He crossed to the iron staircase and went up the steps two at a time, slipping his gun out of the holster as he ran.

There was a circular landing at the top of the first flight of stairs with a half dozen doorways leading into different rooms. Owen darted into one of them and crossed to the window. He heard Flagge's step on the wooden floor below.

Poking his head through the window suddenly, Owen spotted Teeler Quinn running past a couple of porcelain bathtubs which were scattered on the ground near a side entrance. Quinn was about twenty feet below and fifteen yards away.

Owen called quietly, "This is it, Red."

Quinn whirled, his jaw drooping. He swung around so suddenly that he was off balance and nearly stumbled over one of the bathtubs. He couldn't locate Owen at first, and his gun was creating a frantic arc.

"Up here," Owen said.

Teeler Quinn's gun banged, the lead chipping stone from the window ledge above Owen's head. Owen's bullet went through Quinn's forehead.

Owen grinned as he headed up the next spiral of the winding staircase. He called back tauntingly, "How many men you need to run me down, Flagge?"

He went up two flights of stairs to the floor of the castle and then looked out one of the windows again, trying to spot Hemsley. A rifle cracked from a spot to his right near a pile of lumber. The bullet grazed his shoulder, and then another rifle cracked from the top of the graded road.

Owen saw Tate Hemsley stand up behind the lumber pile and fall forward. Vincent was kneeling at the top of the hill, rifle in hand. He lifted his right hand to Owen in salute.

Owen smiled back at him. He turned around and walked to an entranceway which led up to one of the spires. There were stone steps leading upward. He sat down on one of the steps facing the doorway. He held the six-gun loosely in his hand, and listened to Flagge coming up the steps, one at a time, unhesitatingly.

At the third landing Flagge looked in several other rooms before stepping into the one in which Owen was sitting. He didn't see Owen at first, sitting in the semi-shadows of the spire's stairway.

Owen said to him, "This way, Flagge."

The two guns roared as one. With amazing speed Flagge had whirled and fired, while Owen was still saying his name.

Owen felt the impact as Flagge's first bullet took him in the left side. He winced, but he squeezed again and again on the trigger. Flagge was still up even though Owen was confident his first shot had hit a vital spot. At eight paces he could scarcely miss a man.

Flagge was shooting, too, emptying his gun, but his bullets were going wild, into the walls, up through the ceiling. Even when the gun was empty, he continued to squeeze the trigger. He was walking stolidly forward with blinded eyes toward the spot where he thought Owen was.

Owen called sharply, "Flagge—Flagge!" Christian Flagge's thighs hit the low win-

dow sill. His heavy body, still carried forward by the momentum of his stiff walk, pitched through the window. Owen caught a glimpse of his heels and that was all.

He was sitting on the steps, a pool of blood forming where he sat when Vincent came into the room. The little man gulped, "I saw him flying out that damned window, Steele"

"I think," Owen said, "he was dead before he fell. I hope so." He added, "What brought you back?"

"Nancy sent a rider out to warn us," Vincent explained. "She saw Flagge leaving town with Quinn and Hemsley. Our boy took a kind of short cut over the dunes and met up with us a little while after you pulled out to head home. I figured three against one wasn't good odds."

"Not too good," Owen agreed. "I'll need a little patching up here, Vincent."

"Hell," Vincent grinned, "thought nothing could hurt you, buck."

"Bullets do," Owen said. "Now do you help me out of here or do I walk by myself?"

Vincent helped him down the stairs. On the bottom floor he said, "Reckon we can bring Miss Blair pretty good news, Steele."

"She won't be too glad to hear that Flagge is dead," Owen observed. "She's not that kind."

"I didn't mean that," Vincent stated. "I mean that you're alive."

"Oh," Owen said. He looked at Vincent closely. "What in hell does that mean?" he asked.

"Stick around Braxton City," Vincent said, "and you'll find out."

Owen Steele moistened his lips. "It's an idea," he admitted.

"It's a damned good one," Vincent told him, "and you know it."

"What's your last name, Vincent?" Owen asked him.

"Culpepper," Vincent said.

"Culpepper," Owen Steele grinned, "you're a smart man."



... ITS QUALITY

HITS THE SPOT! ★

RETURN OF THE

THE Kid halted his played-out grulla at the crest of the ridge and turned in his saddle, squeezing his pale, cold blue eyes against the down-beating glare of brassy sunlight to stare back guardedly into the draws and canyons of Big Butte Valley. A pair of buzzards wheeled lazily in the cloudless sky; it was the only movement in all that vast expanse of cactus-spiked plain and hazy gray skyline.

He took time, now, to build a cigarette and slip it between his thinned, heat-cracked lips. It had been five years since he'd been in this section of his native state, and he wondered if it wouldn't be a mistake to seek sanctuary at J-Spur. Somewhere back in that wild tangle of cliffs and boulders he had shaken off pursuit; he didn't have to head for J-Spur. But he was so close to it now that he felt an irresistible pull, an eagerness to see how things had changed, if they had; to see Kathy again, if she was still there. Five years! Why, for all he knew, Kathy might be married, now. Or she might have sold out, might not even be there any more.

It would be a shock for Kathy, his coming in on her like this. But he'd be safe at J-Spur for a few days at least, and it would give him a chance to rest up and get a decent dressing for the wound in his shoulder. It was starting to throb again, and might be festering from lack of attention. Of course, there was the other angle to be considered. J-Spur was pretty close to Dobe Wells, and Dobe Wells was the headquarters of Perry Ford, the sheriff. But Ford hadn't seen him since he was a button. Even if Ford had seen that photograph on the reward dodger, he probably wouldn't recognize him.

The picture was five years old—it had been taken when he had just turned seventeen, and was hardly dry around the ears yet. On the dodgers he was still listed as Eddie Duchay, alias the One-Shot Kid, but Duchay was just another alias, and currently he was using the name of Tom Brown. Tom Brown, grub-liner. Tom Brown, just another out-of-a-job cowpoke, looking for a place to throw down his soogans and turn an honest dollar.

Eddie's dust-dried lips quirked wryly. Once he might have been that Tom Brown. Now he was twenty-two, and he'd been too long on the out-trails to hang up his tree with any honest outfit. He couldn't just announce to the world: Eddie Duchay is dead, sheriff, so

forget about him. Sure, mebbeso Tom Brown looks a little like him, but that's just a coincidence. Sure, sheriff, you can write off Eddie Duchay on your tally book. And you'd be surprised, sheriff, if you knew that this time Eddie wasn't running away from the law, but from Luke Carney's wild bunch! That ought to be a laugh for you, sheriff, hadn't it?

Eddie's pale eyes were thinned bleakly as he finished the cigarette and flicked it away with a snap of his middle finger and thumb. Then, with one last careful look out over his back-trail, he gigged the grulla and headed it towards J-Spur.

A half hour later, he saw the ranch house sky-lined from its little notch in the hills up back of Lazy Woman's Creek. A knot rose in Eddie's throat, and he swallowed past it angrily. What was the matter with him? He couldn't let himself get to feeling soft or sentimental about this. He was riding this familiar back-trail for just one reason—grim necessity. Of course, it might be a little tough, facing Kathy. But he'd be a fool to let that bother him. Luck had been a rare thing with him these last couple of years. Now, at last, it smiled and beckoned. So, smile back, Eddie. Tip your hat, and waltz with the lady!

EDDIE pointed the grulla down from the mesa. Below, he crossed the shallow ford of the creek, then started up the grassy slope beyond, giving the horse an easy rein and pulling his battered Stetson lower across his pale, nerveless blue eyes.

A man was just coming out of the bunkhouse as he reached the corral and lit down, and Eddie's cool eyes flicked over him non-committally. The man paused at the top bunkhouse step and stared down at him with a blunt hostility; he wasn't a tall man, but he was big in every other way, big at the shoulders and hips, and big in the legs, and he stood on them in a solid, spraddled-out way that stamped his whole posture as one of belligerent arrogance.

Eddie tied the grulla to a rail and, keeping a steady gaze on the man, strolled over to him.

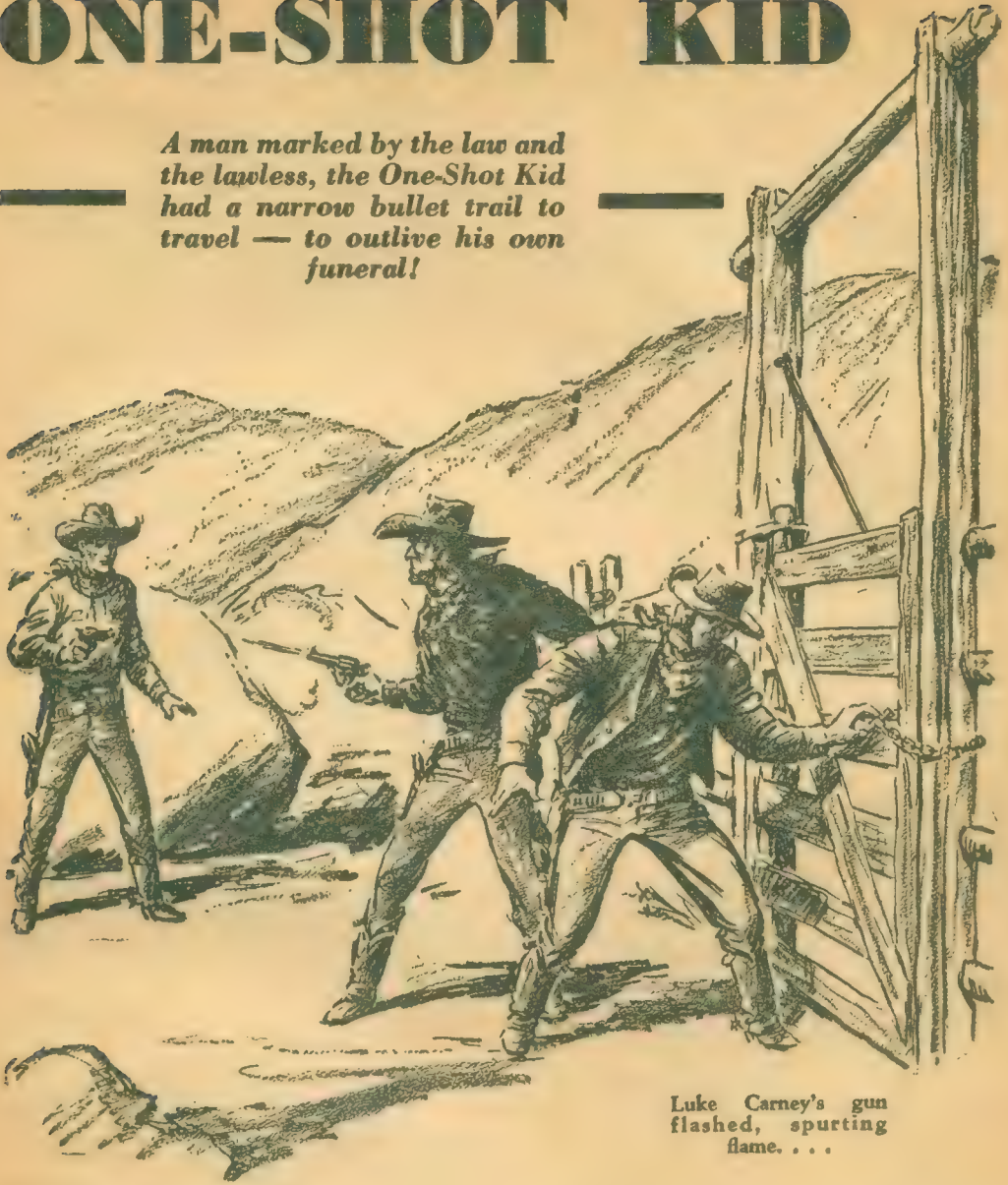
"Howdy," he said. "You the ramrod here?"

"Link Poulter's my name," the man said. His sharp, gray eyes ran over Eddie. "What you want?"

By KENNETH FOWLER

ONE-SHOT KID

A man marked by the law and the lawless, the One-Shot Kid had a narrow bullet trail to travel — to outlive his own funeral!



Luke Carney's gun flashed, spurring flame. . . .

"See the boss," Eddie said.

"I'm the boss. No jobs here. Don't waste your time."

"I'm in no hurry," Eddie said. "Thought I'd talk to the owner."

The foreman's square, beefy face hardened aggressively. "How many times you have to be told?"

"Just once, from you," Eddie said quietly.

"Then once from the boss."

He wheeled, with that, and started up towards the ranch house.

Link Poulter's voice spurted after him, erupting now with a surprised and angry violence. "Hey, you can't go up there! I told you—"

Eddie didn't look back. He reached the path leading up to the ranch house, and at that moment the door opened and a girl stepped out on the ground-level veranda. Behind him, Link Poulter was coming towards the house at a lumbering gait, his run-down boot heels savagely kicking up dust, his blunt-jawed face tight with fury.

The girl moved out on the veranda and stepped down to the path, and Eddie punched up the brim of his hat. As he did, she stopped abruptly and stood rigid, her cloudy blue eyes staring at him in shocked recognition.

"Eddie!"

"Hello, Kathy. Long time no see."

Link Poulter came up, puffing, his sharp, tight-set eyes flicking angrily between Eddie and the girl.

Still panting, he said, "I told him to pull his freight, Miss Jenness, but he got headed up here before I could swing 'im." He faced around, his slitted eyes boring at Eddie rancorously. "Now git!"

"Just a minute, Link." Kathy Jenness was still staring at Eddie, a pallor spreading up from her stiff-set mouth, and suddenly her glance swiveled back to the foreman. "This man used to work here, Link. I—I think I'd better talk to him."

Link Poulter glowered. "You hired me to ramrod this spread. We got enough saddle bums workin' here without takin' on any more."

"You haven't finished the roundup yet, have you?"

Poulter threw a venomous look at Eddie. "No. We got about two hundred head penned up so far."

"There ought to be nearer three," Kathy Jenness murmured thoughtfully. "Maybe I'll ride up to the holding pen this afternoon and you can give me an exact tally."

Eddie watched Poulter's eyes. They were veiled, wary, suddenly. "No need of that," he said quickly. "I'll see you get a final count tomorrow mornin'. And as fer this jigadee—"

"I said I was going to talk to him, Link."

"Well, it's your outfit. No skin off my hide," and Link Poulter wheeled about and started back towards the bunk house, his protuberant lips pouted out sullenly.

Eddie looked at Kathy. "Nice friendly sort, ain't he?"

Kathy Jenness colored. "I don't think you have any right to talk, Eddie. Let's go up to the porch."

They took seats on the veranda settee and stared at each other for a moment in uncomfortable silence. "If you're missin' a hundred head—" Eddie began finally.

"They'll turn up," the girl cut him off sharply, and Eddie gave her a steady, searching glance. She hadn't changed much; prettier, maybe, with a new way of wearing her silky blonde hair in thick braids, gathered up at the nape of her neck into a taffy-bright coil.

She was staring back at him, now, and he shifted his glance under her deliberate scrutiny.

"Why did you come back, Eddie?"

Eddie took makings from the pocket of his gray flannel shirt. He built a cigarette, then sealed it with a flick of his tongue, cutting her a quick glance from the corners of his eyes.

"Maybe to help you," he murmured finally.

"Maybe to help myself."

"I get along all right. When did you ever try and help anybody—besides yourself?"

Eddie lighted the cigarette. "Luke Carney's around, Kathy. Maybe that's why you're short on your tally."

The girl stiffened. "Luke Carney! But—"

"Don't worry, I don't ride with him any more. We had a little argument." He changed his position on the settle, and as he did, a spasm of pain shot through his shoulder and he grabbed at it with a little gasp.

"Eddie, you're hurt!"

"It's not much. But if you could spare a little hot water and some bandages later, I might—"

"Not later. Right now!" Kathy Jenness rose. She looked down at him sharply. "Let's go inside, Eddie. You look half starved. I'll put some steaks on and we'll see about that shoulder."

Eddie got up, grinning. "Okay, ramrod. You won't hear me whittle-whangin' over that program."

AN HOUR later, his hunger appeased and his left shoulder comfortably padded with fresh gauze and a tight over-layer of clean bandage, he sat opposite her in the front parlor while she flicked a hypothetical speck of dust from an antimacassar and studied him out of those cool, unfathomable blue eyes.

"I wish you could come back, Eddie. By rights—"

"Never mind that!" Eddie's voice cut back at her harshly. "I'll only be here two, three days. I made my bed, Kathy, now I'll lie in it. I've gone too far to turn back, now."

"And it might have been so different once, Eddie—" She sighed and seemed lost in thought for a moment, and Eddie stirred uneasily, feeling awkward in the cramped space of a room, and feeling, too, a hard and bitter remorse, suddenly. Already he was beginning to regret the impulse that had turned his steps this way. He had followed the easiest trail; but from another angle it wasn't the easiest—but the hardest.

He felt Kathy's eyes on him, sensed her hesitation before she said, finally, "Eddie, Perry Ford drops in her quite often. If he should find you—"

Eddie said, "What if he should? I was just a brockle-faced button when Perry was up to long pants. He wouldn't know me." He

looked at her searchingly, a sudden understanding leaping into his pale eyes.

"You and Perry, h'mm?" he said.

Kathy flushed. "Maybe. It depends. Perry's term as sheriff has a year to run yet. I've wanted him to give it up. But—"

"But old high-chinned Perry can't see it that way, hey?" Eddie's blue eyes were gently mocking. He shook his head. "Perry always was a jughead. Maybe he wants to collect that bounty on the One-Shot Kid before he turns in his little tin doohicky."

Kathy paled. A sudden anger flared in her cool voice. "At least, Perry doesn't have to run for a fraid-hole every time he sees a familiar face!" The anger died in her as quickly as it had come. "Oh, Eddie, I wish it didn't have to be like this! But now you can see why you can't stay here. If Perry ever found out—"

"He won't." Eddie's voice flattened. "Leave him come. You can tell him I'm a new hand. He won't know the difference."

"Well—"

"Kathy, where's this Link Poulter workin' this afternoon?"

"Why, he told me he and Sam Batson were going to Dobe Wells, to buy a few supplies. Why?"

"Nothin'. Just thought I might take a run up to Big Nosey Canyon and see what kind of a herd you got bunched up. Like to take a little *pasear* up that way?"

"All right." The girl rose. "I'll get my hat and meet you at the corral in five minutes."

Eddie went outside. Passing the bunkhouse, he looked inside, but it was empty. He went on to the corral, and when Kathy came out, he waited with his loop ready till she came up, then roped the zebra dun when she nodded to it and said, "You remember my little Zebe horse, don't you, Eddie?"

He remembered it, all right, and the memory stirred a bitter little pang in him as he brought it over to the gate and threw a tree on it. He was busy cinching up when he noticed the horsebacker turning into the ranch yard. Kathy's tense voice spun him around.

"Eddie! Here's Perry now. You'd better—"

He shook his head curtly. "Now, take it easy. My name's Tom Brown. You'd better introduce me."

A moment later Perry Ford rode up. A pair of remote gray eyes set in a lean, sun-darkened face fell upon Eddie, then swerved to Kathy.

"Goin' some place, Kath?" His mouth was touched by a wry grin, and he looked down at her with a faintly lugubrious expression. "Seems like I'm always poppin' up at the wrong time."

"Why—" Kathy looked confusedly at Eddie, then back at the sheriff—"it wasn't anything very important. I was going up to Big Nosey, but that can wait. Perry, this is Tom Brown. He's going to help us out here, for a few days."

"Howdy, Brown." The sheriff nodded casually. Eddie gave him a straight, steady glance, and nodded back. Then Kathy was saying, "I guess you'd better go alone, now, Tom. The gate's not locked up there. If you see any strays with our brand, chouse them in."

Eddie touched his hat and mounted. "I'll do that, ma'am." He grinned at Perry Ford. "Also maybe a few that ain't got your brand, if the sheriff won't be lookin'."

"Don't count on that," Perry Ford said grimly, and then he and Kathy were walking towards the house, and Eddie gigged the grulla, reaching the ridge beyond the corral before he looked back. Perry Ford and Kathy had reached the veranda of the house, but apparently the sheriff didn't intend to make this a very long visit. Eddie saw Kathy nod towards the porch settee, but the sheriff shook his head, and the last Eddie saw of them, before he crossed the ridge and started down on the other side, they were still standing there, talking.

Was Perry Ford suspicious? Eddie wondered. He hadn't shown it, if he was. The sheriff had given him a pretty straight up-and-down look, but there hadn't been the slightest sign of recognition in his glance. How could there be, after all these years?

EDDIE shrugged, and rode on. Even if Ford had been suspicious, his best bet would be to go on to the canyon, as Kathy expected him to do. He wanted a look at those cows, anyway. He'd noticed a few J-Spur brands in one of Luke Carney's rustled gatherments, a few weeks ago. That was when he'd decided to quit. And that was when Carney had told him he knew too much to quit, and had tried to stop him. Almost, Carney had, too.

Eddie's eyes were set in a vacant stare as he took the grulla down a shaly cutbank into



He was riding this familiar back-trail for just one reason. Luck, at last, smiled and beckoned. So tip your hat, Eddie, and waltz with the Lady. . . .

East Valley and headed for Big Nosey. Familiar landmarks, even the very look and smell of the earth, awakened old memories, and a faint nostalgia stirred in him. Damn his itchy-footed soul! To a kid, all this had seemed pretty monotonous, pretty tame. At twenty-two, a man thought about things in a different way. But you couldn't dam up time, and today wasn't five years ago. Today was too late. . . .

Off in the hazy blue distance he could see the mouth of Big Nosey Canyon now, but, sunk in gloomy introspection, he was aware of it only vaguely. It was a sound ahead of him, a sound of brush snapping under a horse's shod hoofs, that jarred him back to a sudden and startled alertness. He reined the grulla abruptly to a halt, and then saw the rider coming out of the high brush, a hundred yards ahead, and cutting down towards the draw that led to the canyon. Even from here, Eddie had no trouble recognizing the rider as Link Poulter. Poulter's broad, chunky shoulders, square as a door frame, were unmistakable; so were those thick legs, solid as oak-post logs, thrusting down into the tapaderos of the big paint horse the foreman was forking.

An instinctive wariness came to Eddie now, and he gigged the grulla and started him carefully on, keeping to the shank of the ridges where he could see Poulter, without Poulter's seeing him. He remembered now what Kathy had told him: that Poulter had gone to Dobe Wells, with Sam Batson. Why had the big ramrod suddenly changed his plans? Of course, he could have sent Batson on to town, and could be riding out here merely on a routine inspection, possibly with the idea of picking up a few strays. But to Eddie, this section had looked clean as a whistle. He hadn't spotted a cow in two miles. He kept on, riding slowly and watchfully, carefully maintaining the hundred-yard interval. Presently, Poulter dipped down into another draw. This put him out of sight momentarily, and Eddie again gigged the grulla.

Ten minutes later, when next he saw Poulter, the foreman was almost to the mouth of the canyon. And then he saw something else, something that stiffened him in the saddle and sent an abrupt warning twanging through him, like the swift plucking of a taut wire. A few yards from the canyon gate, another rider had suddenly appeared, and of this rider's identity there wasn't the slightest doubt. It was the spare, gaunt-faced leader of the Big Butte wild bunch—Luke Carney!

A sudden icy tingle raced up Eddie's spine as he lit down and ground-hitched the grulla in a patch of tall brush. Then, keeping carefully to the cover of the ridge that flanked the draw, he went afoot, picking his way with

caution to avoid any betraying crackle of brush, walking lightly and stealthily on the balls of his feet, like an Indian. A rim of tall boulders built a solid shank overlooking the entrance to the narrow box canyon, and reaching these, Eddie put a hand back to the smooth-worn butt of the .45 chocked in his low-tied holster.

Peering through a crack between the two largest boulders, he saw Link Poulter ride up and dismount. Carney was already down from his big dun gelding; Poulter walked over to him, and Carney grumbled, "You're two hours late. Something go wrong?"

Crouched behind the largest boulder, Eddie waited tensely.

Poulter was saying, "I ain't sure. Damn' grub-linin' kid rode in, two, three hours ago. I tried to spook him off, but he talked with the girl. Could be she's beginnin' to smell wood pussy."

"Then we'd better haze 'em out of here today. Wha'd the kid look like?"

Eddie felt his nerves pull tight as Poulter described him. "You know him?" the foreman wound up, finally.

Then there was Luke Carney's flat-toned voice again. "Know him! Hell, that was Eddie Duchay—rode with me, till a couple weeks back. Then he got honin' to sniff Gulf breeze. Bad medicine, that kid. He'll have to be took care of—permanent."

Poulter whistled. "You figure he's aimin' to—"

"How the hell do I know?" Luke Carney interrupted impatiently. "Come on, open up them gates! I'll take care of the kid, soon's we get these cows to South Pass. Boys're there now, waitin' for 'em."

Eddie's fingers closed rigidly around the bone-handled butt of his Colt. He straightened, slowly, and peered cautiously over the rim of the boulder. Link Poulter was unfastening the chain from the gate bars, and Luke Carney had his back turned, watching him.

Eddie walked out from the rock, his finger curved around the trigger of the gun. His step was light, catlike. He halted, his feet spread, one planted firmly a little ahead of the other, his body canted a little forward on the right foot, like a tightened spring, ready for release.

"That's far enough on the gate, Poulter!" he called down flatly. "Both you hombres—swing around easy and keep 'em high!"

They were too far apart, Eddie realized at the last moment, but what good was a name like the One-Shot Kid if a man couldn't live up to it?

The men spun around, and in that clock-tick of time, Luke Carney's gun flashed up, spurting flame.

Eddie's shot tore through the echoes of

Carney's as he fired, calmly, almost negligently. Carney sagged back against the gate, clutching his belly. Poulter dove for the shelter of a rock, yanking his gun, and Eddie fired again in the same listlessly deliberate way.

Poulter's feet tangled and he fell, sprawling flat in the powdery dust. Eddie didn't move. He waited until the dust spanked up by Poulter's bull-like frame began slowly to settle, then took a dozen careful steps. Poulter lay motionless, inert. Eddie started on again. His gun arm came down, and at that instant Poulter abruptly sprang to his feet. Poulter's gun bucked, roared.

The slug ripped Eddie's right hand, flinging the gun out of it in a pinwheeling flash of silver.

Poulter stood spraddle-legged, his jowled face twisted gloatingly, and then the gun in his fist lifted, slowly, deliberately.

Abruptly, another shot cracked, and Poulter's mouth flew open. With shocked disbelief, Eddie saw the black hole in Poulter's neck fill with red suddenly. And then he turned and saw Perry Ford.

THE sheriff rode down into the draw and pulled up casually alongside Eddie. He swung down from the saddle and walked over to where Eddie's gun lay half buried in the churned-up dust in front of the pen gate. Picking it up, he came back and held it out, butt first.

"Don't look like you'll need it now," he said quietly, "but you never know when it might come in handy."

Eddie's dazed glance lifted from the gun to Perry Ford's non-committal gray eyes.

"Reckon the handy thing," he murmured finally, "was havin' you drop in just when you did, sheriff." He gave Perry Ford a studying scrutiny. "What were you doin' here, just at the right moment?"

Ford nodded grimly to Link Poulter's motionless body. "Kathy'd been missin' a few head, off and on. I never did like Poulter's looks. Ran into Sam Batson, comin' back from town, and he said he'd seen Poulter moseyin' up this way. Thought I'd have a look-see—just in case."

"A damned lucky look-see—for me," Eddie muttered.

Perry Ford was standing over the body, now, staring down at it studiously. He turned, at last, and his grave, quiet eyes caught on Eddie's.

"The end of the One-Shot Kid," he murmured finally.

Eddie's breath caught. "The One-Shot Kid!"

Perry Ford shrugged. "Poulter's only been in these parts a month. Who'll know the difference—Eddie?"

The One-Shot Kid stood speechless for a long-gathering moment.

"I don't savvy—" he began finally, but Perry Ford cut the words off curtly.

"That's all, Eddie. The rest is up to you."

Eddie drew a deep breath, and suddenly it seemed as if a great weight was slipping from his shoulders—the terrible, soul-shattering weight of regret and remorse he had carried for five long, smoke-clouded years.

"Sheriff," said Eddie Jenness finally, "I wouldn't think much of a man who'd let his future brother-in-law down."



HOW CLOSE IS HELL?

Bullet-riddled Jeb Christian wondered as he lay helpless on that blood-soaked bed in his storm-lashed badlands cabin. For Christian, the tough man of Montana, knew that beyond that flimsy cabin door were the slowly advancing bounty-hunting night-riders who never lost their man—the Jackleg Avenging Fighters of the Utah Mormons! You won't want to miss Walt Coburn's dramatic Old Frontier novel

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HELL FANS THESE GUNS

"A gent can be too good, mister—too good to be worth the lead to shoot him down!" —

CHAPTER ONE

Marshal Wave Around

LATE of morning, O'Rourke topped the twenty miles of stiff, uninterrupted grade and reined in his piebald for a decent blow. The country was high, and it was hot. The crazily uptilted basin caught and reflected the drenching sunlight like a stove top.

He knuckled back his sloshing hat and sweat dumped in rivulets across his dust-filmed face. He put his hands on the pommel of his saddle and teetered forward on his arm-

pits to ease the soreness of his seat. It crossed his mind that fifteen years of town life slacks off a man's saddle hardness.

He looked up at the slab sign written with



Without looking around,
O'Rourke knew the lead had
found old Sammy. . . .

bullets for his arrival, gray eyes narrowed against the beating glare of the churned yellow sky.

The sign tersely warned: MARSHAL WAVE AROUND.

That was clear enough, even written in bullets. A little assorted range war, rustling, mayhem and hellzapopping was going on—it was Territory, with no law but what a man packed in his fists and guns, and somebody didn't want a hired marshal messing about. Of the many thoughts he might have had about the sign, the one that held his mind was, *Written with a forty-caliber. That is a damned unusual gun.*

He swung his bleak, inscrutable gaze at the uptilted basin. Gashed and eroded and up-thrown, it ran in a vast wave of rust and gold to hurl itself upon the blue barriers of the mountains. Heat moved across it in a solid lemon sea. Beneath the shimmering surface of the glare, the town floated like a sodden pile of rope, sprawling loose and formless. Heat had stripped all color and third dimension; it looked flat and drab and gaunt.

The town was the core of a country that spread a hundred miles on every side, but it had no core of its own except the deadfalls and the bars.

His glance picked out the tanner's, the tallow works, the freighting yards, the horse corrals, the big sheds of the grain and feed house. Two streets ran into the apex of a V from different trails and different country. One street blistered under desert heat and dust. The other was dark and cool in the wooded shadows of a gulch.

He had never been there before, but with his eyes closed, he would have known almost every business and every street and alley and every type of person who lived in every house. Put him down at any given spot and he would have known precisely what lay behind him from the sounds and smells. What it all added up to was another sun-blistered, wind-whipped, dust soaked cowtown, stagnating in range trouble and strangled by its own insensate toughness.

"We ain't even trigger happy," H. T. Staub had said when he rode over to Chisolm City to corral the marshal. *"We're just plumb lead loco and blood balmy, with every tough trying to figure a worse kind of mayhem. Two weeks ago they roped a rancher named Dinsmore to a post and set it to sinking in quick-sands. A month before, they nailed Clyde Ranger to his barn rafters while they run off his prize brood mares. Last week, little Allie Sturgess was shot through the hip while two drunken lobos were having a fight. There ain't no real business left and purty soon there ain't going to be no town left unless somebody tames us hard."*

The prospect had tempted him, but it had been Chambrá Staub who clinched the deal. Chambrá, arching her straight black eyebrows and saying with her deep voice, *"But there is no glory in cleaning up Wind Basin. It is just plain tough and ugly and unimportant. The world never heard of it and doesn't give a hoot what happens."*

That had challenged O'Rourke's integrity and he had never passed a challenge in his life. So here he was riding in to tame the town. But looking down on it, he felt the corroding weariness of the game eating him. It was a game that gave a momentary thrill, but there was no real payoff, no goal, no abiding satisfaction in it. The old excitement of the challenge was growing thin. Slowly it was turning him harsh and sour and he knew it, and now he asked himself, *What is it that keeps driving a man along a lonely friendless trail, with never an end or lazy stop, but always a rockier hill?*

The answer had been stolen from him fifteen years ago in the blinding crash of that mountain storm that carried his bride and the man she had run away with hurtling into that abyss. He had seen it happen and within the hour sat looking down into the thunder-filled darkness, feeling fierce, primitive angers drain with this act of retribution. But out of the ashes of his relentless vengeance had risen a more terrible emotion than his wounded pride—the doubt of his own manhood. By cheating him of the chance to blow the man to hell himself, death had cheated him of the surety that he was the better man. It was a question he still had not fully answered.

He had turned lawdog, thinking the risks and tests would give him back his self-respect. But never yet had he met a test big enough to balance the doubt that girl had given him. The years had rolled on, his gun had smoked, and he had waded through most that is sordid and brutal and violent in mankind. He had not succumbed, but his immersion in the muck had stained him. It was in him like a bad taste he could not spit out.

HE PUT his horse down upon the town, coming in under the white burning glare of high sun. It was early in the afternoon, but Saturday, and the dust of incoming riders hung thick and acrid in his nostrils. Shacks formed out of the beating, shimmering glare ahead, but oddly, the first house was a two-story affair set back under the shade of oaks.

The door broke open as he neared and a chapped and spurred rider was catapulted onto the porch. The man caught his balance and stood there in an ugly mood. He had the look of a hardcase and a rough one, and his ex-

pulsion had turned him nasty. He stood there, cursing, and it became apparent he was cursing a woman. He caught the name Maxine.

She came quickly into view with a riding crop in hand and the crop lashed down across his shoulder. "Shut up and get out of here!" she commanded. "This house isn't open to drunks and trouble-makers, Wiggins!"

His cursing broke. He stepped back a half pace, and his hand lashed out and caught the crop. His face went wild; it was clear he meant to strike her. She knew it—there was time enough to see that on her face—but no slightest sign of cringing showed in her.

O'Rourke liked that and his gun sprang out. It barked once and the man lurched violently against the wall. He stood hopping, with one high boot heel torn off. He swung his gaze onto O'Rourke and rasped, with a string of curses, "Mister, you are reaching wide for a pilgrim!"

O'Rourke reined up and swung from his horse. He booted his gun and moved in stiffly along the walk. The other was still cursing him fluently. O'Rourke's left hand laced up and clamped his jaw. He shoved up and back and the man clawed with mixed pain and rage.

O'Rourke said on a flat note, "That beard waggles too fast for its cut!" His right hand knotted and twisted in the beard and yanked hard.

The man lifted one explosive howl, ripped free and went running out to where his horse was racked. He hit leather cursing and reaching for his gun. But O'Rourke's .44 was beaded on him, and he satisfied himself with a tainted threat.

O'Rourke found Maxine studying him. A woman's curiosity was in the deep knowledge of her eyes; a faint amusement touched her cynical mouth. He knew the type and had seen it on occasion from the Mississippi west—that rare thing, a woman who, put to every indignity and outrage man was capable of, had survived and surmounted experience by the sheer tough fibre of her nature and could match a man in the life she had left.

She was, he guessed, in her early thirties. She had a strong, bold beauty, even under the harsh light of high sun. Her body was full and solid and compact. He thought of a wild outlaw mare he had once hunted for three solid months, and trapped a dozen times, but never caught.

She said speculatively, "I reckon they told the truth about you—if you're the town tamer, O'Rourke?"

He gave a grave nod and touched his hat. "If I were, what would they be saying?"

"That you ride in tougher than the toughs." She laughed. She made a gesture through the door. "Want to light and clean up?"

He glanced beyond her to where a group of pretty but hard-faced girls were clustered in the hall. "Another time," he told her stiffly.

Her eyes hardened, but not with anger. She simply matched his aloofness. She nodded toward the street. "Wiggins will remember that and he is a bad actor. He has got cat's sight in the dark."

"Something to know," he thanked her. He was looking at her with attention.

"Yes?" she asked.

"I was wondering," he said, "what you are doing in a poverty and mayhem soring cowtown when you might be running a showboat on a river, or yore own show at some railhead, or yore own game in some bonanza gold field."

Black ice dropped across her eyes. Her head lifted and her gaze thinned. Her broad, full lips turned a little cruel. Maybe knowledge of what men can do to twist a woman's life ran through her head, and maybe with it, knowledge of what women can do to men.

"And I am wondering," she answered finally, "why you are soring in a friendless game along a bullet ridden trail when you are not a man who preens on glory or can get drunk on blood."

His lean face turned angular and inscrutable. "Somebody has to do some good!" he told her.

She made a gesture. "The same answer to you, O'Rourke!" she laughed. "Men come to my house in a rough and lonely land to hear a gentle song, sometimes to cry a little or go a little mad, to feel the softness of a woman's hand upon a feud-fevered brow, to forget the pounding of a roundup, or just to relax from a fight they had."

He snorted and jerked his head where Wiggins' dust still filtered down. "Like that?"

"No, not like that, O'Rourke," she corrected coolly. "I am not running a deadfall. Drop in some night and we'll touch that iron heart in yores with a laugh, and maybe bring a dampness to yore hard eyes with a memory."

She had probed him and sounded him with acid accuracy, and he damned her silently and pulled tight his hat. "If I were O'Rourke for sure," he grunted, "and stopped by, it would be as marshal, remember that."

Eve's wisdom showed in her mocking eyes. "You are a hard man, but a good man, O'Rourke," she said. "That is what I will remember."

He nodded and gave her no smile, and moved back to his horse.

Neither pity nor condemnation of Maxine occurred to him. She was probably as ruthless and relentless as he was, and yet she was no more evil. The rigid social barriers of the towns were unyielding and inflexible—there was no middle ground for a girl like that.

Yet there was need for the Maxines. Their force was hard, ruthless as the fierce and savage land, but it was not corrupt or vicious.

VICIOUSNESS lay beyond the apex of the streets; it started with the brown-shadowed clapwalks and gathered like a floodhead. It was in the raw, boastful, heavy voices that tore the tinkle of glasses and lunged out over the batwing doors. It was in the sour leftover smells of whiskey-sodden sawdust and tobacco juice that spread out upon the beating heat. It was in the feel of beady eyes that watched with the intensity of snakes from deep shadows and alleys as he passed. It was in the low swing of every man's gun and the stiff crook of his elbow, and the way every horse was left standing with cinches tight for a quick getaway.

O'Rourke looked neither to right nor left; he moved like a careless thing adrift upon the river of running heat that eddied through the banks of dark tiered shadows. Yet nothing missed his eye along the block—no whittler's face, no pony's brand, no doorway or space between two buildings or angle that might offer a man hiding or protection.

He passed Staub's Hardware and saw the owner come wide alert out of a catnap and stare out into the bleaching glare that screened the street. Staub was a fantastic figure of a man, bald, with a head the hue of a violent desert sunset, a face like a laughing turtle, and a body round as a billiard ball. His body was set upon toothpick legs that looked too thin to hold him but that held the dancing spryness of fine steel springs.

He came to his feet like a jack-in-the-box, started to call out and raise a hand, then, quickly thinking better of it, turned his movements into pursuit of a flea. O'Rourke drifted his horse along through the fine powdered dust, edging around traffic here and there—an incoming buckboard, a backing wagon, four riders with the expectant brightness of thirsty men upon their faces.

The street bottled out without rhyme or reason. A bullet-ventilated trough was spouting enough to form a mudhole beside a scattering of sheds and the blacksmith shop. The smith was standing in the doorway, with tongs and a piece of hot metal in a muscular hand, listening to a black-whiskered giant give some amusing gossip. They were grinning and the giant finished and filled the street with a booming laugh. He lifted a leg and slapped it, and the sound was sharp as a pistol shot.

"Young Beasely saw it from the freight sheds," the giant vouched, and then swung to follow the blacksmith's gaze and the two watched O'Rourke coming toward them.

They had been talking of the bearding he

gave Wiggins—this fast had the story drifted ahead of him through town.

The giant had a chest like a barrel, arms like fence posts, and an enormous stomach that began on his chest and rolled in one line of sheer brute muscle down below his middle. He wore leather pants, grease-smeared and weathered to a shiny, mottled black. The smell of a muleskinner was on him, and he had the bright, roving eye of a freighter bully always ready for a boast or trouble.

He spat and the movement carried his body forward from his hip sockets. Muscle had long since bound his waist movements, the spring of his back and the suppleness of his short, beefy neck. He had come to be built almost in two sections, like a big spider—the whole body worked as one unit—his legs were separate.

The giant watched him rein up to water with a bright speculation flowing up into his eyes. He said to the blacksmith, "Was I Wiggins, I'd cripple a man for that!"

"Mebbe he will yet," the smith grunted.

The giant felt fondly of the beard that circled his face in a thick jet fringe. "There'd be no mebbe if it was me," he persisted loudly. "I'd gut him if I had to trail the damned black lizard to Kinkeearkee."

O'Rourke gave his horse a small, careful drink and drew it back. He laid his gaze flat upon the watching giant. The gray of his eyes was dark and bleak. He said "I'm the man you'd gut so easy, friend, but I don't like the way you describe me."

The man blasted a hollow air sound against the top of his mouth. His whole face widened with brutal amusement. "I dunno as I aim to change the way I talk," he grunted.

O'Rourke nodded toward his middle. "I don't see anything to back yore fresh lip, freighter."

The giant had a small mean mouth. It split now and twisted back over tusks of teeth. He stretched his hands in front of him, palms up. The muscles of thick, rein flattened fingers stretched against the skin like sausages. He pulled the fingers slowly in a crushing gesture that balled his hands. He turned them over to show fists the size of hams.

"Those will back anything I say, mister," he told O'Rourke with ready truculence.

"Not against this, they won't," O'Rourke stated flatly. Not an expression broke the iron mask of his face. He drew his gun and dropped its barrel casually and put a shot scorching under the skinner's boot.

The man cursed and jumped gingerly. A second shot lifted him again and turned his face crimson. The next turned him gray and brought a wince of pain. "Hey!" he bellowed on a rasping note. "That is too damned close!"

"Not as close as this," O'Rourke told him flatly, and put a shot under him that ripped clean along his sole.

The giant expelled wind in one bark and jumped wildly. He was knocked off balance on the watering trough, and sprawled with arms flying in the mudhole. O'Rourke snapped open his gun and thumbed fresh shells in with lightning rapidity.

The giant floundered out of the hole, spitting mud and sucking through his teeth for breath. His brutal eyes had turned small and piglike and wicked red. He snorted his nose clean of mud and cuffed his post of an arm across his mouth. "Mister," he rasped with a hard suck of air, "there will come a time when you ain't got that equalizer!"

No slightest trace of humor showed on O'Rourke's rough-boned face. This was business; he was already on the job. The incident had been calculated, cold and grim. He let his stare linger flatly on the hard-breathing man. "There will never come a time that I can't best a tough," he said. "Gun or no gun, I will put dust into yore face."

CHAPTER TWO

Giant Killer

THE ring of iron was in his tone and it made its impression. However it happened, the giant had been spilled and set to sucking mud, and it was the first time in his life that a man had put him on his face. Anger was a rip-roaring flame blazing all through him, but the seed of caution had taken root. His button lips twisted to vent a fresh opinion of O'Rourke, but the thread of caution stilled them.

O'Rourke swung his attention on the blacksmith—a smaller giant, but in a different way, his muscles rippling with the fluid flow of molten metal. Smiths were rough and rugged but invariably solid. He asked, "Smith, what are the rules in this town."

Fresh, dry humor broke across the blacksmith's heat-reddened face. He spat and wiped the back of his hand across his lips and regarded O'Rourke with a twinkle. He nodded toward the rider's gun. "Why, I reckon you've got all the rules right there, stranger."

O'Rourke nodded and swung his horse across the thick dust of the square. The high heat of day had turned and the dead white glare was receding in a fast outgoing tide. From long habit, he noted the sun would set dead at this end of the street, a thing to know when lead was flying around at sundown.

He put his horse through the hot stagnant shadows beginning to fill the alley and ordered a box stall and rubdown, but no drink or feed, at Bailey's stables. There was an en-

trance from the stable yard to the hotel, but he chose to come back through the alley.

He stopped at the corner of the clay walk to keen the town fresh through the cooling lemon haze. Wiggins' horse was racked a few bars down across the street. Men were drifting in an out of stores, loading up supplies, and respectable womenfolk were moving with prim aloofness along the street.

A young buckaroo was standing in the deepest layer of shadow on the hotel porch, attentively paring square, furrowed nails with a barlow knife. He had the hard, trim cut of a young stallion, but the raw, reckless mark of the mustang breed was creeping into the forthright bluntness of his broad-boned face. He had a humor in him, and he muttered without even changing his glance, "That is about the best mud pie I ever saw, stranger!"

"He asked for it," O'Rourke grunted back. "He has a loose tongue in that beefy face."

"Yeah," the buck agreed and paused to glance contemplatively across the street. "Another of Sprague's bullies."

It was an odd piece of information to come voluntarily from a stranger, and O'Rourke turned to give him closer scrutiny. A strange kind of a man; one hard to judge. Physically he was tough as rawhide. The muscles of his thighs and shoulders swelled with a solid roll against his clothes. His hands were square across the back and calloused and his wrists held the strength of twisted rope.

But it was the eyes of a man O'Rourke searched and it was the eyes he looked at now. Blue eyes, the blue of a high range sky with the harsh, white gleam of the desert sunlight in them. Hard eyes, reckless eyes, but not the eyes of a bad hombre. Yet pressure lines were already showing in the mouth, as if the man were constantly aware of the figure he had to cut, as if he were driven by some stronger force outside himself which he could still not bar out.

A man without his temper set, O'Rourke concluded. A man with violence in him that can still turn either good or bad.

He nodded and moved on and checked into the hotel. He carried his saddle bags to his room and, throwing the window wide to let the stale air out, was hit with the rush of incoming heat. He turned and looked at the room, seeing in his mind's eye a hundred rooms precisely like it that stretched back along the trail. A squeaky, battered brass bed, a spur-scarred table, a bureau streaked with whiskey marks and scarred with cigarettes. A brass lamp with a cracked rose shade; a bowl and picture painted with flowers nobody had ever seen. The room had the feel of a place used by men who felt alien within four walls. Theft and murder and mayhem had

been planned here and left their grim spirit, but the walls had never known a gentle thought or peace.

O'Rourke scowled and dissatisfaction with his life stirred through him restlessly. He was beginning to feel like this damned room inside himself—bare and bleak and stale.

A voice on the street sang out, "Where's yore brother Bat, Luke Yancey?" And the man who had spoken to him called back, "He'll be in by sundown. Wait and I'll mosey with you."

O'Rourke closed his door and moved back downstairs and came onto the porch as Luke Yancey swung aboard a sleek coal black quarterbred and got off in a start like a pistol crack. O'Rourke walked to the door and stood on the porch, peering after Yancey, still conscious of that pony's amazing getaway, and putting the rhythm of it in his memory.

Obliquely across the street, a girl in lavender moved along the clapwalk with a familiar pace. Something hard and hot and hungry thundered down through O'Rourke. It was Chambré Staub and he watched the rhythmic swing of her walk, and the signs that told of a quiet, square pride. She turned and faded into the deep dusty shadows of Wriggle's Notions. O'Rourke drew in a deep breath and went to find a scrub and shave.

He came opposite Staub's and turned in, and found customers loafing without any sign of hurry. He ordered two boxes of 44's and moved down the counter and while Staub put them in a bag, caught the movement of Staub's lips saying "Come out to supper." He nodded and took his change and moved back out. At the drygoods, he purchased a new shirt and socks and underwear, and then moved onward to a barber's.

A rough-looking waddy came out in front of the bar where Wiggins' horse was racked, and watched him, and went back in. He had a hot bath, scrubbing the trail grime off his hard flesh. Standing to let the air dry him, he had a man's simple satisfaction at his skin's clean tingle.

He heard a scuff on the roof above him and, from instinct and habit, stepped back as his gaze angled up at a grilled skylight. Something flashed in the sun as he looked. A heavy knife ploughed into the boards beneath him and quivered. He had his gun on a clothes peg, but steps were already pounding toward the back of the roof. All he could tell was that the man wore cowboy boots and had a long stride.

He picked the knife out of the floor and hefted it and, opening the door, glanced through. Wiggins' horse was gone from across the street, but the waddy who had watched him from the stoop was now loafing in the barber shop door. O'Rourke took the

knife and sent it smashing into the door frame beside his face.

The waddy jumped, looked at the knife, then looked in at O'Rourke with a queer expression on his face. O'Rourke said, "Something yore outfit lost," and slammed the door. When he came out dressed, the man had left, but the barber was full of curiosity.

HE GOT directions for Staub's and spurred dragged out, walking off his trail stiffness and getting the feel of the place. Evening's light was slanting down and the intense heat was lifting off the town in waves.

A bunch of the boys had gathered over in the freight yard and he dawdled over to find the giant of earlier showing off for drinks. The man had his great arms locked around a barrel that he was crushing to his enormous chest. He was having difficulty with this trick and his face was purple when his pig's eyes slanted across the barrel top and centered on O'Rourke. He relaxed momentarily and a truculent light blazed in his eyes. His lips twisted back against his teeth. Then he sucked a deep breath and his arms tightened like cable ropes. The barrel squeaked and then literally exploded.

The giant stood back, brushing his ham-like hands, with half the staves broken at his feet. "Thank you, friend," he mocked O'Rourke with a truculent leer. "I was thinking that was you."

The crowd sensed trouble and put its attention on O'Rourke. O'Rourke let his gaze circle them through his cigar smoke; he stood considering the blue ash of his good cigar. A fight was, he thought, a silly thing. He stood a good chance of being shoved into a basket for his final ride to Boot Hill. Bock, the giant, was of no importance, except as a human beast who worked—and probably murdered—for Sprague. Nobody but an idiot would take that challenge. The crowd really did not expect it.

O'Rourke had more important work to keep his health for, and he thought of it as he carefully laid his cigar on a wagon tire. "I would not like," he murmured passingly, "to lose that smoke." He started to remove his coat.

Bock stopped dead and stared at him. Wicked anticipation rose and faded through the disbelief upon his face. "You mean to take me bare-handed?" he gusted. A grudging respect threaded the wilder things within him. "Why, mister, you're a crazy fool!"

The crowd stood transfixed for a space of doubt, and then brutality burst through it like a prairie fire. It was a rough crowd, a tough crowd; its rising excitement was primitive and raw and savage. This was something

better than a common fist or gun fight. This was vicious, primitive, brutal murder. Bones would crack and flesh would tear and blood, and maybe guts, would flow!

The words, the shrill edged yells and calls, the sudden sweep of red blooded crowd hysteria, formed a rousing background for O'Rourke's grim feelings, and yet rolled off of him completely. He was not going into this for fun or glory or fawning homage. He was going into it dispassionately, cold as a glacier, detached from passion as a star. Meeting the challenge, certainly; but win or lose, clearing the bullies with less guts from his path, and breaking the toughs into camps and arguments that would help him by countering each other.

Bock got his feet set and bent forward, one line from his rooted hips to his head. His head was down and jutted forward, and he watched O'Rourke with a wicked, slanting gaze. His elbows were bent, his hands open and spread, like the teeth of a clamp shovel waiting to slam. "One bone," he growled, "for every shot you took, stranger! And the rest I'll crack and splinter up like I did that barrel!"

O'Rourke moved before him, light on his feet, balanced, quick. He was under no delusions as to what he was in for. One slam of that polielike arm would drop a man like

a mallet. One crush of those muscles would crack him like an egg.

Bock let out a sudden blast of breath and darted at him. A mountain of beef and bone and raw fighting smell hurtling across that space with the speed of wind. O'Rourke waited and then darted aside and kicked him in the shin.

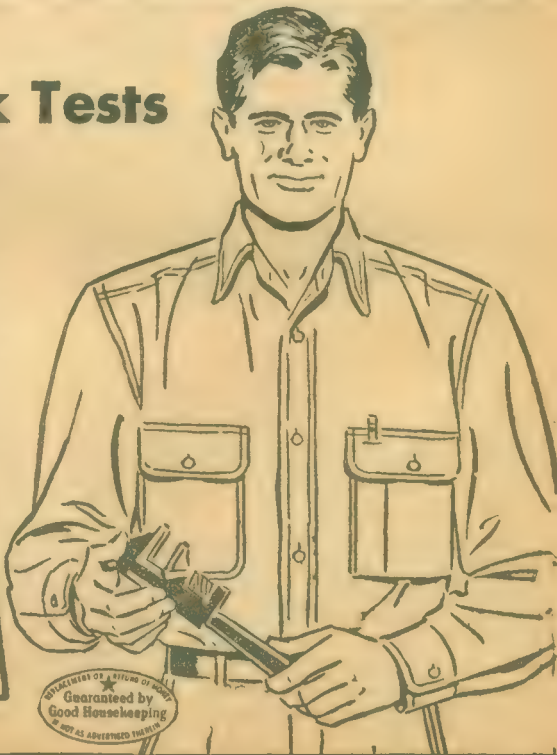
Bock stopped dead and exploded a grunt and hopped upon one foot, holding his other leg. O'Rourke moved in behind him and gave his broad backside a kick with everything he had. Another man would have been lifted and flung upon his face. It barely budged Bock; it only served to boil his anger.

He spun like a bull. The last contemptuous humor was shredded off his face. He circled. But he was wary now. His arm clawed out in powerful, short, grasping strokes. Suddenly, his great paw of a hand clapped on O'Rourke's neck and yanked. The shouts of the crowd went dead; O'Rourke heard the shuddering suck of its breath.

He was being carried forward against that massive wall of flesh like a chip on a tidal wave being smashed against a rock. He sucked a great breath through his teeth and straightened in Bock's grasp. He came in upright as a tree, hands rising and shooting out before him to those enormous shoulders. His hands struck with an impact that shook him;

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he had to fight giddiness from his head. He had only one bare moment now to win that fight or lose it.

He brought his knee up like a pile driver and felt it crack like a sledge on Bock's low hung jaw. The giant let loose a roar of anger. That blow had all of O'Rourke's concentrated power in it. But more, it had the impact of Bock's own pull.

For that instant, O'Rourke could have ducked out of the giant's grasp. He did not. His blunt fingers dug into Bock's beefy shoulders. He kept his knee up and threw his angular body back and brought his foot forward with every ounce of energy he had.

His hard boot toe sank into Bock's stomach. Hurt shimmered against the brute savagery of his face. He froze and sucked a rasping breath that made the air shake.

O'Rourke clamped his left hand atop his head and pressed down. Nothing could budge the raw power of that bull neck, but it brought the man's big body forward; it changed the angle of his head. It put his blunt, beefy neck in a straight horizontal line as his big body lumbered to catch balance.

O'Rourke moved fast. He took one quick half step aside and pivoted like a bull fighter. His right arm came up, and his iron-corded forearm crashed down across Bock's neck. Bock gave a bellow and his big arms flailed out as he sprawled forward. Bock hit dirt as O'Rourke's knee bent and straightened. His long body lifted from the ground in a short fast arc. He landed hard, stiff legged as a bucking bronc, heels driving into the giant's kidney. He hit and bounced and struck stiff legged on the other side, and switching, put his sharp heels smashing between Bock's shoulder blades.

The giant exploded one torn and terrible burst of breath. His muscles contracted, and then he sprawled inert as a pile of earth with his tongue forced through his lips and lolling in the dust.

O'Rourke stood back, breathing hard, senses hazed from the sheer force of his effort. Not a sound broke from the gaping crowd. Men stood frozen in the grotesque positions of following a fight. Their eyes were still ashine with vicious brutality in the slanting evening light.

Bock did not move. Somebody said dubiously, "Damned if he ain't licked." The crowd muttered but couldn't believe the thing it saw. There had been no blood, no cracking bones, no tortured groans, no burst of frenzy. There was no blood-and-flesh reality in the victory. Men turned their attention slowly to the victor, smiles pasty, an unexplainable chill tingling through them.

The man was not human; he was not even smiling. He was something grim and relentless and utterly unfeeling; something not of flesh and blood and bone, but of ice and rock and iron.

O'Rourke had won respect and fear but not homage, and inwardly he nodded. That was the way he wanted it. It cut him clear of the encumbrance of a fickle, fawning crowd.

A drawl cut the still-uncertain muttering of the crowd, a voice saying, "Well stranger, you've done purty well at busting up the Sprague outfit today, and it ain't even sundown."

He looked across the crowd and found a loose jointed, rawboned, timber wolf of a man lounging in the office doorway. The slyness and shrewdness of a fox was in his face; his mouth was merciless. It was Sprague and he was watching O'Rourke with calculating judgement. "You come in from the East," he added. "You see that sign out a ways?"

"The sign written with a forty?" O'Rourke grunted.

Silver light splintered from Sprague's eyes. "Observin' fella, ain't cha?" he allowed.

The crowd had fallen silent, respectful of Sprague's soft-coated malice for one thing; pricked with curiosity about this stranger for another. Now Sprague was silent in his inscrutable considerations, and through this silence, the excited hubbub of another crowd arose. It came from the shaded gulch street that ran off the apex; the street reserved for the respectable element in town.

The noise grew and the crowd came into sight, mostly angered women, talking high and shrill. A sullen-faced boy drew up a flat-bed wagon and looked at Sprague. The old wolf called, "What's up, Harry?" and shouldered with careless arrogance through the crowd.

He glanced into the wagon, and the sight smashed even his tough knit hardness. He drew back as if he'd looked in upon a nest of snakes. He barked a cussword. Then, shortly: "Yore pa. Rope-hauled—out on those salt needle flats, I'd calculate."

The boy nodded, anger smoldering beneath his locked sullenness. "Last night," he said. "We was camped alone by Two Spot Water-hole. It was only one rider, but he caught us asleep and gun raked us both."

He turned his thin face and exhibited a blood encrusted gash. "When I come to he had the old man's pony saddled and pa roped. He dallied the rope on pa's own hoss and drove it off into those salt flats, pa thumping and fretting the animal with every fresh step it took."

"Who was it, Harry?" Sprague grunted. "I didn't see his face or hear his voice," the boy muttered, but the smoldering fires in him

blazed up into his eyes. "But it was a hoss with a quick getaway, I'll remember!"

A taut dead silence fell through the crowd. Then another boy blurted, "Gee willikins, fast as Luke Yancey's?"

"Yeah!" the boy bit out on a leaden tone. "Fast as Luke Yancey's. Just that fast!"

The crowd started to babble. A rancher named Hastings silenced it with his deep-chested voice. "What time was it, Harry?"

"Before first dawn."

"Luke Yancey was shooting poker with me and Bill Bullitt and some others until four o'clock," Hastings stated. "He couldn't have made it."

Sprague grunted, "It was Bat Yancey had it in for Harry's pa."

"Bat Yancey's hoss was racked in front of Maxine's all night," Yoke Plummer called. "It was there when I rode home near two o'clock. It was there when I drove the wagon in at sunup."

Not even enemies raised a doubt. Both men were cut four square and honest. Wetness made a sudden fiery shine on the boys eyes. Revenge was tearing through him like a whirlwind. "Whoever it was, I'll find out!" he yelled. "God help 'em when I find out who killed my pa!"

O'Rourke saw Chandra Staub on the far side of the crowd; Chandra with her eyes big and black and staring from the dark beauty of her face. She looked straight at him but didn't see him. She swung and made her way back uptown with a rapid pace.

He stood on for a moment, listening to the twisting flow of suspicion. Nothing was added to his knowledge, nothing gained. He moved away, feeling the black weariness of his life corroding in him afresh. The words varied, but the tune was always the same.

Day's burning heat was cooling, but the excitement had turned the town raw and hot and flushed. Anything could happen on Saturday with a crowd in this mood; a drunken argument could set a whole street aflame with gunblaze. Or it might boil off without a single shot.

In any case it paid to know the town's back alleys and he turned through midway of the block. Noise came muffled from the main drag at this distance, but a raw and dangerous note was in it.

CHAPTER THREE

Town Tamer

HE MOVED clean to the end of town and stood for a space, watching day slip like a wounded man down upon the prairie, with the sun dropping in a great pool of fiery blood. He stared into it with

eyes narrowed to bare slits, and yet even the break of the sage-fringed hill was hard to bring into his vision. The sun dropped plumb in line with the street, beautiful and blinding; a man on a horse could ride out of it, and for the space of its setting, present no target.

He turned back with his shadow falling long and edged with red ahead of him. At the stables, he turned in the back way. He gave his horse water and saw to its feed himself. He stood in the box for some moments going over it for trail gaunt, watching for saddle gall and bows and splints.

Shadows were thick and dark through the stables as he moved out toward the square of light beyond the door. He heard voices, low and tense, and saw the speakers suddenly, and stepped back, meaning to turn about. But Chandra's low, pulsing words caught and held him.

She was standing in front of Luke Yancey, her face harsh with a woman's anger, yet filled with hurt. She challenged on a low, hot note, "Luke, you both swore to kill him when you saw him against that grass fire that destroyed yore brood mare."

"I would have ripped him apart with my bare hands," he growled angrily, "if I'd ever had the chance. But I was not out on north range, Chandra—you heard Hastings tell what I was doing, and you heard the boy tell what time it happened."

"The boy!" she breathed. "He was too berserk with grief to know what time it happened."

"I rode out to the ranch late and back in this morning. What time does that leave a man?"

Her neck stiffened and she looked steadily into his face. "It is this morning I'm talking about, Luke! I know horseflesh and I know your horse. That horse had been on a fast all night run when you rode in. Any other animal on this range would have been dead spent."

He lifted his hand and made a violent, cutting motion through the air. "Damn it, I didn't do it, I tell you."

"Then it was Bat," she said with conviction. "Steller was yellow, but a bad hombre. None of your men would have dared ride in on him alone."

"Bat was down at Maxine's," he bit back at her.

"You're siding him!" she accused shrilly. His eyes turned leaden and his face went bleak. He's my brother—I'll always side him." he told her warningly.

She looked away. A woman's deep inward struggle tore cruel lines across her face. Then she came to a decision so sharp and definite it blotted all hurt and struggle from her. A mask of calm purpose dropped upon her.

"So, Luke," she told him steadily, "we are no longer friends. I have stuck by you longer than any other. But I will not stand by a man who thinks murder a way to gain his ends, and I will not risk saying this again. We're through!"

O'Rourke studied her intensely. It was not a bluff. There was iron resolve in the girl and she meant it.

She gave Luke a long steady look and let him see the truth. Then with a bare nod, she turned by him through the back entrance of the hotel. Luke stood absolutely motionless not even damning her until her boot taps died. Then he came loose in one violent curse and, wheeling, turned berserk fury upon a corral rail until it split. Its sharp noise stopped him, and he stared at it. After a moment, he got himself in hand. He picked up his hat and jammed it on his head, and crossed to the alley with anger frozen in him.

O'Rourke stood unmoving for a moment and then stepped out and examined the corral rail. It was tough cedar and how a man could split it with bare muscle was a question that gave him a new opinion of Luke Yancey. Bock could not have done it. Bock might have pulled until he sprang the rail from its sockets, but the timed, coordinated violence to split that rail was not in all of Bock's mammoth body.

It was that same streak of violence, that strike of a lightning bolt, that lay in pools beneath O'Rourke's iron containment, and now he thought, *It is too bad Luke Yancey forked his brother's trail. He might have been a badly needed man.*

He moved out through the dust of the alley, turned right along the street, away from the hotel. He watched the town life moving by with the steady pound of boots upon the clapwalk punctured by the increasing rise of dust-rail voices. He caught snatches of conversation.

"The hell he is, or he'd have worn his star and used it if he had sense. . . . I'm telling you it is O'Rourke! I saw him once at Abilene. . . . Aw, what glory would he find on this wind table?" There was other talk, mostly about him.

Then his ears pricked up. "That son of a louse Steller had it coming anyway. A skunk. . . . All right, but that is not the first time a hoss with a fast getaway's been heard at night! There's an outside killer on this range, or some tough is hiding a damned good animal—"

The talk sank into sound of a Saturday crowd. O'Rourke flexed muscular, supple hands in front of him and stretched his shoulders. He straightened the fingers of his gun

hand to the limit, stretched them wide, and appraised what this had done to relax them. That had been a hard blow he put across Bock's neck. It had stiffened his arm, tough as he kept his muscles.

He turned down along the level of the stoops and through the batwings of the Trail Bar. A crowd was gathering, but it was not yet heavy; tobacco smoke still drifted in a single waving sheet through the shadowed yellow lamplight. Luke Yancey stood at the far end of the bar, alone. A black and violent mood was beating like a night wind against the bleak mask of his face.

O'Rourke poured a drink of deep, rich red, and used the mirror to cut sign on the crowd. Yoke Plummer was there, neck long and lean and bronzed, with his Adam's apple running up and down like a mouse. He was talking with a man who was the spitting image of Luke Yancey, except that he was a mite heavier, older, tougher with experience, and the bad brand lay in the merciless line of his lips.

They stopped in their conversation and looked at O'Rourke. Yoke Plummer said something that brought a quick, rough grin pulling at Bat Yancey's mouth. Yancey said, "Mebbe we ought to have him in our outfit."

But his gaze drifted beyond O'Rourke, and his thoughts with it, and O'Rourke knew with certainty there had been some argument between the brothers. Luke Yancey straightened and lifted his glass, and looked at O'Rourke across the top of it. Recognition was in his eyes but he made no move to press it. Instead, he turned at a slight angle to have his drink.

The glass stopped at his lips and then he set it carefully down. For an instant his blunt, rope squared fingers rested without pressure upon the exact edge of the bar. Then the drop of his hand carried through. He wheeled toward the deep shadowed back of the room. His gun barked twice with a peculiar sharpness in its tone.

A third shot came from the back of the room, wild and striking the ceiling. A figure twisted half around, but from the thighs up. It poised in this grotesque, twisted position for a moment, and then pitched onto the floor.

Bat Yancey's hard announcement came without emotion, "Bushwhack Overt." He drifted a curious gaze to O'Rourke, "A Sprague man. What did you do to him?"

"How do you know it was me he wanted?" O'Rourke asked. He moved down the room behind the barkeep with a lamp. The man had sprawled face up and he recognized the man who had stood in the barber shop door.

Bat prodded him with his boot and gave

a snort of finality. "Because there are five Yancey men in this bar and friends, and Bushwhack was not the hombre to take long chances. He likely figured we wouldn't give a damn."

O'Rourke thought of Sprague's remark about the sign. He looked at the gun Luke still held in hand. He had it palmed loosely and was holding it up and at an angle where he could snap out another shot if need be. It was an unusual gun, a precision made piece, and had the look of a .40 caliber. O'Rourke grunted, "That is a wicked gun and a purty gun, friend."

Luke turned an expressionless face toward him. "Yeah," he answered. "There ain't another like it in this country."

"Yo're good with it," O'Rourke conceded.

"I can use it like a pencil," Luke told him. Blunt challenge moved across the surfaces of his eyes. Then he gave the gun a bounce in his hand and booted it. Readiness for trouble was in him, but not pressing truculence. Either he had not come to his mind on what to do, or else he meant to let O'Rourke build the trouble.

O'Rourke said speculatively, "I reckon I owe the Yancey outfit a drink."

Bat Yancey breathed a laugh. "Why not?"

Luke Yancey's face remained inscrutable. He said without either affront or friendliness. "You don't owe me anything, stranger. It was a good excuse to get rid of another louse."

He took his gaze off O'Rourke and put it across at his brother. Then he wheeled on his cowboy heel and thumped back to the bar. A swamper was already fixing to haul Overt's carcass out.

Bat Yancey raised his black, shiny eyes to O'Rourke and spread his hands.

"THE kid's sore about that Steller gossip," he grunted. He looked at O'Rourke a long instant with wild humor racing over the surfaces of his eyes.

"O'Rourke wouldn't be yore handle now?"

"Might be," O'Rourke admitted.

Bat Yancey laughed. An easy laugh. A real laugh. But his humor was totally detached from the things that worked inside him. "Nothing like saving a man you may damn to kingdom come," he chuckled. "Well, let's have that drink while we can."

The liquor warmed O'Rourke; the grim, realistic challenge of the game began to spread through his blood. Maybe this was the part of the tune that gripped a man and held him—the readiness for fun or fight, the tough-grained give-and-take, the saving of a man you might fight yourself tomorrow, the drink with a man you might better wish damned.

O'Rourke had his drink, got a bare nod from Luke and gave a word of excuse to the others. Bat Yancey's eyes were laughing as he nodded. "This fella O'Rourke," he brought up again. "They say he is a mighty cool, tough hombre!"

"There're a lot of men could answer that description," O'Rourke said.

"Not too many," Bat drawled. A hardness crept into his humor. "Not too many here, friend—but you could."

"A hard compliment to live up to," O'Rourke told him.

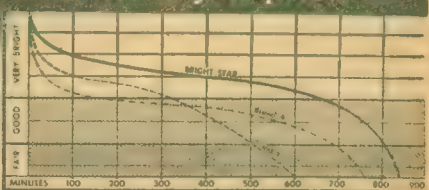
He moved out through the doors. The high country chill touched his flesh and tingled. *Man could roast to death on a desert up here and freeze the same night*, he thought. He put the thought into terms of men. Men were like the country that spawned them.

He moved down into the crowd and idled toward the blacksmith shop where the smith was beating out his metallic music, a half stripped and gleaming bronzed figure in the red light of his forge. Loiterers stood inside, palavering. He crossed through the thick dust of the square as if he meant to join them. Thick shadow swallowed him, and his movements quickened. He cut alongside the big building and shortly found the alley leading down to the respectable gulch street.

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Fires flicked deep in O'Rourke's eyes, like range fires in the high wind that comes before the storm. He had a momentary regret that Luke Yancey was mixed up in this when he had the courage for better ways in him. Maybe he had been trying to live up to his brother's violence and drifted on the wrong trail from inexperience. But once a man had intentionally committed mayhem it was in him like a corroding stain. O'Rourke had little doubt it had been Luke Yancey who rope-hauled Steller. Maybe he had fixed a clock or contrived in some way to set his alibi. The getaway sound of a horse like Luke's was too distinct to be confused. Harry Steller had been convinced—the town had thought it, and there were the things the girl had said.

From his circuitous route, he arrived at the Staubs' back door. Chambrá tilted her head sidewise from the oven and then came erect, wiping her hands upon an apron. He remembered those hands—a horsewoman's hands, strong and sure, yet holding the gentleness a man would look for.

No slightest surprise showed upon the dark and smiling beauty of her face. "You got to town," she murmured, "just in time to win me a bet."

He stood tall and angular before her, his long wedge of a body filling his black broadcloth coat. Irritation showed faintly in his gaze. "Didn't I say I'd come?"

She laughed. That low, slightly challenging, deeply stirring laugh. It was a woman's laugh when she means it particularly for the man she's with. His laugh—for him only. No mood or memory of Luke touched it. She moved against the sink and leaned there. Her eyes were probing.

"Yore word means a great deal to you, doesn't it, O'Rourke?"

"Yes," he nodded. "A great deal. It is the only thing I have to set myself by."

"And other folks?" she asked.

"I keep my word. I expect them to keep theirs."

She turned sidewise to him, dropping her gaze and running a forefinger along the edge of the sink. "You're a hard man, O'Rourke," she answered finally. "There is iron in you. Heaven help your woman!"

His whole body tensed. It was an unconscious thing; a movement out of fifteen years before. The storms of that far time swirled through his eyes. "Why?" he muttered. "Why do you say that?"

She lifted her head and looked at him frankly. Her eyes were opaque now. "No woman could stand up to you without that same iron in her. Few women have that, O'Rourke."

He thought about that. He thought about the metal he had seen in her earlier.

"You have it, ma'am," he told her.

She turned and looked at him. Intent stillness lay on her face. "You mean that," she murmured. "You're an honest man, O'Rourke. You are entitled to something as honest in a woman."

- He was not a smiling man; the smile fought its way across the iron severity of his face. She saw it and knew it for the great compliment that it was and a dark light responded in her gaze. Then H. T. Staub broke upon them with his fantastic, springy gait. "Sneaked in!" he accused. "Come out here and meet what little is respectable in this hell-ridden community!"

O'Rourke followed him through the house to the front parlor, heavy under the air of self righteousness, self importance, consciousness of business interests and property. He could have shut his eyes and accurately pictured the men who represented respectability, law and order, the thrift and industry of the community.

When he faced these men who might have put an end to trouble on their own, but did not, the rebel spirit bolted in him. He found himself almost against the law.

Yet Staub was right. They were the respectable. Without them, with all their smallness and fears and grasping, there was no community, there was no prosperity, there was no peace. It was their very fear of arrogance and self sufficiency and violence that brought the law and held the lawless and the ruthless kings in check. These men were necessary to the community. He sat down with inscrutable boredom while each importantly spoke his piece.

It was supposed to be a half hour meeting. It had lasted three times that and reached the usual point of nowhere, when O'Rourke grunted impatiently, "I thought you pulled me in to tame this town? I will tame it with my fists. I will tame it with a whip. I will tame it with guns. Or however need be. But I can't tame it if you aim to hamstring me with legalities. Let me handle things whatever way seems best as they crop up."

The good folk grew nervous. Staub apologetically gave O'Rourke the cue to take a walk. He went back into the kitchen where Chambrá was glowering at her spoiled dinner. She offered to sneak him off a slice of roast beef.

He glanced back sourly toward the murmur coming from the front. "I need air to clear the *maybe's* from my head!"

She laughed, threw a shawl across her shoulders. They moved out into night's velvet darkness and invigorating chill. They walked slowly toward the spring creek and stopped to look into the starwashed mirror of its dark pool.

He felt the magnetic pulse of her hand upon his arm. Her vital, feminine warmth spread out to him. There was a fire beneath her dark and secret beauty; a wild fire, and he felt the sharp surge of a man's jealousy.

She felt the stir within him and turned and looked up steadily into his eyes. "I am not a woman of iron, O'Rourke," she told him. "I can only be honest about myself."

"What more could a man ask?" he answered.

"Much more—a man like you," she said. "He could ask that nothing else in the whole world, absolutely nothing, had ever touched a woman's heart. Mine has been touched, and deeply, O'Rourke."

He stood aside within himself and saw the harshness and cruelty and violence of his own life stream past. He said humbly, "Things a man might be better for not knowing have left their mark upon me, too, Chambrá."

She dropped her gaze to her hands and startled put its wash down the jet plaits of her hair. She did not whisper, but she spoke so low he barely heard. "There is nothing in my heart now—nothing that I know—except the mark."

He nodded. She was a woman raised by men and she spoke their language. Fearless, honest, straightforward. Telling him the thing he wanted to know.

His arm moved out and circled her. For an instant, her feelings remained distant from him. Then she turned and came toward him like the bend of a great flame. The warm vitality of her lips burned through him.

The understanding formed a silent bond between them. They went back to the house and he passed on to the front room. Men's eyes were bright, faces were flushed with argument. The same arguments. They would stick at it until their houses were burned and their daughters stolen under their noses.

Staub said with angry apology, "Yo're our man all right, O'Rourke, but we ain't quite decided just where a marshal's law starts and stops."

"Maybe I can help you," O'Rourke told them. "It starts with the first jasper gets out of line. It stops when the last wild cowhand is tamed."

"It is the way of doing it we're arguing on," Staub growled.

O'Rourke extracted a twisted black cigar and put an even light upon it. He stood with his feet spaced, teetering a little in his tracks, and jetted a slow, steady smoke at the hanging coil oil lamp. He said almost casually, "Gentlemen, the way of doing it is my affair."

Simpson bridled. His gray brows beetled out and his eyes fired. "We have to pay you but we don't need to hire you!" he reminded.

O'Rourke bowed acknowledgement of both

items. "Then there will be no law and it will not make the slightest bit of difference."

Simpson tautened with premonition. "Why not?" he forced out.

"Because in that case I will clean up the town on my own. I will make my own feud. I aim to stay in this basin."

Staub grinned. The blacksmith had come in and he grinned. Meyers rubbed his heavy hands. It brought decision and the men behind O'Rourke stood up. Nobody bothered about Simpson and the men who didn't. Staub stood on tiptoe to whack his shoulders and it was Staub who put on his star.

"You'll want us with you for yore first trip through town?" Meyers suggested.

"No," O'Rourke told him and a bleak heaviness was in his eyes. "I will go alone. I want to see the first man who challenges this star."

The girl had been listening. She was standing in the prisms light of the hallway holding his hat, a quiet smile upon the broad bow of her lips. Her father started to follow O'Rourke to see him out, then quickly withdrew his head and closed the door.

The girl moved out on to the porch with him. The bulk of their shadows melted against the darkness of the yard. Out in the street, hoofbeats started up and faded. They drew apart, conscious now of the glass door pane that must have silhouetted them. The girl gave a low, unashamed laugh and they parted.

CHAPTER FOUR

Range Lobo

O'Rourke moved back into the din of town. The wagon crowd had left, but the riding crowd had hit its drinking stride and made up for the absence. O'Rourke had heard an Apache tribal war dance once; that was the way the town sounded. There was wildness and recklessness and cruelty in the whooping rise and fall of loud voices. But viciousness was in the silences, in the shadows that watched him pass, and the men whose faces clamped shut as they spotted his star.

The brawl started with loud voices and pushing after he got into Dublin's—two cow-prods from different outfits on the rampage. It turned suddenly harsh with fists smashing and bodies tumbling, rolling toward him, and breaking almost at his feet.

A raw curse of a particular type had been thrown and the two men rolled free, faces grim now, bouncing afoot and drawing. O'Rourke was caught in the middle, with hot lead flying.

The crowd bolted out of the line of fire. But those caught in the middle had melted to the floor, except O'Rourke who stood erect and watched this bleakly. It had the smell of a put-

up job; with both men reloading and no wounds, he knew it was with certainty.

Dead silence lay upon the room, broken only by the shrill whistle of hard breathing and the rapid click of shells being loaded. O'Rourke took the cigar from his mouth with his left hand. He said levelly, "That's enough fireworks for you two jaspers. You can ride out and fight it out on the prairie."

The ganglier of the two shot him a scornful look. "Yeah?" he snapped contemptuously. "That star cuts no gravy in this town, O'Rourke!"

O'Rourke's eyes held the dark rolling gray of a nearing storm. "Boot yore guns, boys, and sashay!"

"Like hell!" the man snorted. He thumbed a shell home, cuffed his hammer with his thumb butt. The bullet creased the high boots O'Rourke wore beneath his pants, veered slightly and brought a sharp, half uttered cry that ended abruptly. Without looking, O'Rourke knew the lead had found Old Sandy, a harmless, gossipy range drifter who had melted to the floor behind him.

O'Rourke's gun roared from his hip. The cowprod sprang into the air cursing and clutching for his arm, his gun clattering into the sawdust. O'Rourke dropped into a low crouch and swung, crabwise, as a shot from the other man whined over his shoulder.

O'Rourke had the drop from this angle. The man's raw and brutal face was mottling with ash gray. He licked lips turned dry and stiff as setting putty. He held his gun dead set before him, frozen where it had beaded between the marshal's shoulders. O'Rourke watched him without a word. The hammer of his gun gave two oiled clicks.

Sweat broke on the man's brow; his face turned suddenly formless and sloppy. "It was meant for him, marshal!" he cried. His voice sounded like a rusty gate. He jabbed his gun at the other man. "So help me, I was trying to cover you!"

The man was crouched and his shot had angled from low by his hip up into the balcony. Violence came up through O'Rourke like a desert wind. His broad lips flattened against his teeth. He stepped over to the man and his gun tip lifted and dropped hard, and the other jerked at a smashed wrist and dropped his gun.

O'Rourke scooped the gun up and booted his own. "I am not going to kill you like a side-winder," he bit out through set teeth. "I am going to give you the punishment that fits yore breed instead."

He had the man's own gun. Now he grabbed him by the collar and hoisted him. The gun flashed up and raked down across the other's slack, frightened face. The gun rose and fell and rose and fell. Each time it sliced pencil

wide streaks of flesh, and opened bloody channels. He held the man erect finally and threw the gun at his head. That last act was what froze the crowd.

"All right, get out, I said!" he snapped. Cold and hard and dark as iron. Not an edge of emotion in his voice. Not a sign of reaction to what he had just finished. He included the two and stepped back on to the bar. One lurched with wild movement for the door leaving a trail of crimson, and the other followed with his head hung and his teeth driven into his lower lip, whipped.

Not one solitary sound broke the dead quiet. Then somebody turned sick. The crowd let out its breath with a grim sigh. Somebody said non-committally, "Looks like we got a tough marshal."

"I can be tough," O'Rourke told them leadenly. "There is no trick I can't match, and no mayhem I don't know. I am going to break and tame this town of toughness, or you will drop me into boothill, gutted. But while I can walk or crawl or move a hand, I will give the toughs and the sneaks and the hell raisers anything they ask for. Remember that."

Men cleared their throats and coughed and moved awkwardly in their boots.

"Beginning tomorrow," O'Rourke went on, "no man will wear his gun in town."

They felt the impact of that. It struck deeper than the gun mauling. Somebody rasped, "Hell, marshal, that would be murder for some of us—riding into town without a gun."

"Ride in armed, but check yore hardware when you get here," he said. "That goes for all."

IT WAS on the Yancey side of the street. The two Yanceys stood against the wall.

Luke Yancey's jaw angles bulged with pressure. Flat sheets of silver light were blazing in his eyes. Something violent was happening in his emotions.

Bat Yancey had his hat poked back and was leaning back indolently against the wall. A cigarette jutted downward from his lips, smoke curling beyond the long tip of ash. The cigarette had not moved since O'Rourke went into action.

He took it from his mouth and dropped it and mashed it with his boot. He was watching O'Rourke with deadly contemplation, but it was deep, a bare shadow, beneath the mocking lights that played upon his gaze. "Yo're a tough man, O'Rourke," he grunted through the silence. "Steller wasn't cut up much worse from his rope ride!"

Luke Yancey half turned his head, as if he heard some distant sound and sought to place it, but was not conscious of it against his fiery thoughts.

"Steller," O'Rourke pointed out, "was

jerked out of sleep with a gun on him, and roped while he was half conscious. He was not shooting at a man's back. He had no chance. He was murdered, Yancey—a difference."

Hard humor twisted Bat Yancey's lips. "I dunno. If I was Kayo, the man you just whopped, I'd a wished you'd murdered me while you were about it!"

It brought a laugh and eased the tension. But nothing touched Luke Yancey's molten scowl. Bat looked around at him. "I reckon I'll drift down line."

Luke's upper lip lifted and then fell back. His eyes were riveted on O'Rourke, but the feelings raging in him were much broader than simple hate. Many things were bombarding his mind at once, like an attack of wasps.

"To Maxine's," Bat Yancey added.

Luke broke himself out of his trance and nodded. "All right."

"Don't get in any trouble," Bat told him. His mocking glance drifted back across O'Rourke. "The new marshal wouldn't like it."

Luke Yancey came unsprung like a heavy steel spring. O'Rourke could almost hear a twang. He hitched at his belts and nodded again. "I'm all right. Go on."

Bat gathered two lean, loose hung riders with a gesture and moved out into the night. Luke swung toward O'Rourke and stopped to give him a level look. Truculence was in him, but it was buried under something more important, something he had to get off his chest right now.

"Kayo had it coming," he grunted. "But I am wondering if you will take a massacre as well when it hits you."

O'Rourke put a fresh light on his cigar. He looked at Luke through the flame of the match; a queer statement to come from the man who had rope-hauled Steller.

"A man gets about what he asks for," O'Rourke told him.

Luke's head snapped up. "You reckon you will?"

Glacial bleakness touched O'Rourke. "I paid off ahead of time, Yancey."

Luke Yancey's jaw muscles bunched again. He didn't look at O'Rourke. "Mebbe we all do," he grated, and moved on.

O'Rourke made the rounds of the bars, leaving his no-gun order. The story had spread ahead of him. Here and there he saw contemplation, reckless speculation, the stir of glory hunger and revenge in men's eyes. But no man wanted any part of him tonight. They wanted time to feel him out, to judge him afresh and find where weakness lay in him.

He could feel their thoughts; could smell their hatred. Yet of all the violent men in town, O'Rourke was at this moment probably least hated and feared only by the two Yanceys and Sprague. That would come. When it did,

they would gather their armies—their bleak-eyed range riders, and would whip organization and order into a milling pack. They would strike like a stampede. They might even drop their feud and join to get him.

He knew it and thought grimly that he didn't mean to give them the chance. He meant to push the fight, ride them, roil them, rip through their ranks.

He left the last deadfall with murder driving at his back. Beyond the house he stopped to let the keen chill under the armpits of his coat. He frowned, knowing he had been in no place long enough to cause a sweat. A harsh thought of his age burned through his head.

HE MOVED down to the end of the clappwalk, and sank into shadow to rest against the stoop. The wildness had been dumped out of the town with the gun lacing of Kayo; the town's voice had turned from a reckless whoop to a lethal growl. Now even that was dying. Horses in pairs and fours were drumming out to range. Cheery calls and friendly good nights drifted dimly through the darkness. In them were all of those assurances and reliances, and knowledge and acceptance of another man, which men have no words to say.

It struck a spot in him and left a hollow echo. Looking back across fifteen years of loneliness, he missed those things. He had ridden alone and he was tired of it. He wanted a ranch and a home and friends and a good wife. But where was his right? Even with Chandra's honest faith, there was the old driving doubt—his self-respect to replace.

He felt suddenly harsh and raw and restless. He moved on past the apex of the streets and Sprague's dark freight yards with his lips pulled hard against his teeth. He moved clear down to Maxine's, the house bright but secret behind closed shutters. The deep tones of men's voices drifted out behind the gay cascade of girls' laughter. But not drunk, not bawdy.

A moment of silence and then firm hands struck a chord from a piano, and shortly a woman's voice was raised. He had never heard her sing, but even had he not talked with her, he would have known it was Maxine.

He thought of her eyes; cynical, wise, hard with knowledge of human iniquity, but still challenging, scornful, unbeaten. She finished the number and swung on into one of the sharp-tempoed, humorous range songs. At the end, a grin was stretching on his lips. And O'Rourke had not grinned at a song for years.

A single horse was racked before the house, Bat Yancey's yellow and white. The stomp and movement of other ponies came from a shed to the back and side. Maybe Yancey had top billing. Or maybe he was the only man

there who didn't give a damn if it was known, or didn't have a wife. O'Rourke moved beside the horse, spoke to it, ran a quieting hand along its neck. A good, tough horse, a first rate cowpony. But not one with the fine quarter breeding of Luke's coal black, and not one built for a lightning getaway or all-night running.

He felt the cinch, found it loose and knew a mixed surprise and irritation. He turned around and stared at the house again for a long space. Then he moved back into town to look in on the late drunks and all night games. Luke Yancey had moved from the Dublin and moved his horse somewhere, and was now deep in a heavy game in Doc Wheeler's strictly gaming place. He was sober and in good company, but playing a driving, cut-throat game. Twice while he stood by, O'Rourke saw surprise flash across Yoke Plummer's face.

It was, O'Rourke noted on his turnip watch, precisely five in the morning when he turned in. Bat Yancey's horse still stood in front of Maxine's. The game was just breaking at Doc Wheeler's. A lantern cut its smoky yellow square against the drifting night down at Sprague's freight yards. Dawn lay just over the horizon, spreading its bands of rose, yellow and gray.

O'Rourke stood a moment looking at the door of his room from the inside and then not only turned the key but put a chair beneath the doorknob. False pride was not in him; he was not above recognizing and admitting that some day he might be caught napping.

He had traveled a long trail. This was his first of nine nights in a bed. It was full noon when he came fully awake from sound slumber, and was instantly conscious of some commotion in the town.

He doused his head, scrubbed cold water on his chest and, dressing hurriedly, went to the street. Down the block a gaunt, work-gnarled, grim-eyed rancher sat his horse before a gathering crowd. He was trailing another horse with a man's figure tied over it like a sack. One sleeve was burned off the rancher's shoulder. Dust and smoke grime covered him in layers, and anger put a raw edge to his voice.

"Lined poor Kel here against the horizon and rifled him from behind against the dawn," the rancher rasped. "He never had a chance! Fired my grass in the middle of my market herd and in the stampede run off fifty of my best stock. Three of 'em, but there is one that I'll remember!"

Questions popped out of the crowd.

"The one that rode the same hoss that Harry Steller heard! It had the devil's getaway, or I'd have quartered the man in that fire."

His gaze stopped on Harry Steller. The boy hung, grim and smoldering and watchful, on

the fringes of the crowd. The rancher's eyes swept on to Luke Yancey and blazing fires suddenly leaped high in them.

O'Rourke said, "I know where Luke Yancey was at dawn! And his brother."

The man swung his attention on O'Rourke. Fury and doubt mixed and fought across his face. Suddenly he lashed the air with his quirt. "Then it wasn't Yancey, but by God it was somebody and they rustled me of a full year's living! I ain't been in this range trouble, either side, but I am getting in it, and if I can't get my steers back, I will get somebody's blood!"

"Which side, Ham?" Sprague's soft, grating voice asked.

"You know which side!" the rancher barked. "I ain't got no quarrel with you, Sprague. You've done paid me well for water and grass."

Sprague's wolf face crinkled. He looked across at Luke Yancey. "Is there range trouble, Luke?" he drawled. "Mebbe we better find out. Mebbe we better put an end to it."

Yancey remained inscrutable. "Mebbe so," he grunted. The rancher's glare had drifted back to him with fresh doubts. Yancey cursed. "All right!" he barked. "I played poker in Doc's until full dawn. Poole and Plummer and Hastings hiked off to bed and I got my horse and rode down to Maxine's. I had breakfast with Bat and rode back to the hotel and I just got up. That all clear and plain?"

"No," the rancher growled bluntly. "It ain't clear who else has got a hoss as fast as yore's on this range." He thought things over. "You'd side Bat in any case. How do I know he was at Maxine's? I ain't had trouble with you, Luke, but there's bad blood betwixt me and Bat."

Luke Yancey made a roiled gesture. "Don't take my word for it. Ask the marshal."

O'Rourke said, "Bat's horse was there all night. It didn't move."

"What about the extra hoss he keeps there sometimes?" the rancher rasped.

O'Rourke was not a profane man, but he cursed now. Silently. He had been a fool not to think and check on that. Luke was watching him with a queer smile, part angry, part bitterly mocking. "Well, we'll damned soon find out," O'Rourke growled, and moved downstreet.

Bat Yancey's yellow and white pony still stood where he had left it. O'Rourke passed on to the sheds at the side. It had been a late night at Maxine's and three of the guests had stayed. Their horses were there, and so was another Bar Y. For an instant, O'Rourke's jaws angled like an anvil. Then he felt the horse, looked at it closely and shook his head. The horse had not been out on a hard run for a week.

CHAPTER FIVE

Dead Sure

HE WENT back to the front door and knocked. Maxine opened it herself, a little sleepy, not yet ready for visitors, but, after a late night, looking still fresh and vital.

"Why, marshal!" she greeted him with her cool, cynical smile. "You are calling as the marshal, of course?"

He acknowledged the fact without humor and followed her into a big side parlor. A piano, good rugs, a pretty pair of settees, some comfortable chairs, a crystal chandelier. No roughhouse wait on here. It was civilized.

He soaked it in, letting it tell him additional things about the woman who owned the place and had brought this good taste into a raw cow country. He turned back to her. "I want to see Bat Yancey."

Her eyebrows raised. "Marshal!" on a lilt, laughing note. "What if he's not awake?"

A voice sang through the hall, "I'm awake all right!" Yancey swaggered through the door. He had the look of a man who has eaten and washed but not been to bed.

"I'll see him alone, if you don't mind," O'Rourke said.

Bat Yancey's expression changed. It grew watchful. He took a tailor made cigarette and lighted it, but carefully. He never took his eyes off O'Rourke. He smoked with his left hand.

Maxine threw back her head and gave the marshal a long, probing look. Her smile went chilly and her eyes hard. "No," she shook her head. "Not this time, O'Rourke."

His eyes thundered at her. "Yo're standing in the way of the law?"

She gave a shrug of firm shoulders. "You make your laws for the town, O'Rourke. I'll make mine for my house. One of them is no fighting and you look like fight. A second is that no friend or guest will be gunned out of here."

"I might differ," O'Rourke snapped.

Her cool gaze mocked him. She turned away to get a cigarette. When she turned back she held a .38 derringer. A wicked gun. She held it steadily. "Is your law tough enough to fight a woman?" she asked.

He searched her. She meant it. She would fight if need be. Not for Bat, but for herself; for the courtesy and protection and rules she had laid down for her own house.

He gave her a look of grudging respect. "It can wait," he grunted. "I know anyway."

Her mouth eased. Something personal and deeper than the hard cynicism crept into her eyes. "So you aren't all tough, O'Rourke?" she murmured. "I'm glad I know that."

He moved by her, only faintly curious of her opinions.

He slammed the gate. His boots made a steady pound on the dusty path. He stopped suddenly and swung back. She was leaning against the porch post, the derringer dangling. Day's flooding golden light was in her eyes. She was smiling.

"It was a hard man and a good man who sent me here, O'Rourke," she called. "He made me shoot him dead!"

He swung back toward town. Anger was boiling in him. He didn't know why; he didn't want to admit it. Fierce anger. Violent anger. It was not her gun—it was her mockery and deep knowledge of him that did it.

The excitement had stirred up early drinking. Most of the men who had stayed in town were bellied up to the bars when he finished breakfast. He had given his no-gun order and now he moved through the places one by one, reminding the forgetful, staying grimly until his reminder was heeded. Luke Yancey's anger was burning his drinks up. He had killed half a bottle already and not a sign of it was in his hand or eye.

When he hit Sprague's side of the street, he saw the Steller boy still hanging around. He stopped and asked him if he had money for breakfast. The boy looked at him sullenly. "If I ain't, what of it?" He wanted no kindness. He wanted nothing but his own thoughts and company—and revenge on the rider of that fast horse.

O'Rourke considered him a moment and then passed on. The boy was young, but he had a bad streak in him. His father's murder had let it flood and it had poisoned every thought and action, and it would stain his whole life now. Maybe in a year, two years, five years, he would be one of the bad hombres somewhere along the trail that O'Rourke had to tame.

The anger was back in him now and he needed action. His lips compressed as he swung up into Sprague's own bar. Sprague leaned at the very end, alone, detached, untouched by anything but his wolf hunger for power. His men drank separately down bar.

Wiggins was there, Wiggins wearing a gun, with malicious deviltry in him, swaggering and boasting roughly.

O'Rourke's voice cracked like a pistol shot. "Wiggins, there a new order of no guns!"

Wiggins turned and stood with his thumbs resting on his belts, insolence on his vicious mouth, some secret humor in his eye. "I heard tell," he nodded.

"You want me to take it from you?" O'Rourke demanded.

"That is the only way you'll get it. If yo're able."

O'Rourke's big body fell into timed rhythm.

He moved forward with a balanced careful step. A man standing, if properly, had advantage of a moving man on the draw, and this grim knowledge was in O'Rourke's movements, feelings and expression. He came down bar as if walking upon eggs. But he came. He came steadily.

He reached Wiggins and his hand laced for his gun. His other hand darted like a snake for Wiggins hip. He jerked that gun free and was conscious of its weight simultaneously with bellowing laughter that welled and shook the roof. Wiggins had framed this; his gun was wood.

The man stood there roaring, flaunting the joke square into O'Rourke's face. O'Rourke tossed the gun aside and glared at him. No slightest humor touched his face. No embarrassment. Nothing but the hatred of a man for a snake. "A wooden gun," he said. "But still a gun, Wiggins—and an insult!"

Suddenly he raised his open hand and smacked it across Wiggins' face. He slapped it across and back and across again. The imprints of his fingers stood out even through the beard.

Wiggins' eyes filled with venom. A ripping breath sucked through his teeth. "That is twice you've bothered me," he rasped. Temper strangled him; the words came in a hoarse whisper.

SPRAGUE'S eyes filled and splintered cold gray light. "Twice was enough, I'd think," he murmured. He laid his gaze flat upon O'Rourke and gave a dangerous smile. "Yo're tough but not so smart, O'Rourke. You should know by this time to kill 'em or leave 'em lay!"

O'Rourke blasted a snort of solid, burning contempt. "His sort?" He swung and started from the bar.

Actually, he did not hear anything. It was the dead silence, the utter suspension of breathing, that put hackles fluting on his neck. His senses keened just in time to catch the faint scrape of metal upon wood.

He threw himself aside and crouched and drew. Down bar, a gun roared precisely at the spot where he had stood. Wiggins was close to the bar, face gray, lips wet and twisted, nostrils pinched, and eyes ashine. His left hand rested on the bar, his knees were crooked. His gun swung after O'Rourke. O'Rourke was moving with a jump. Midway of the jump, both guns slammed. A piece tore out of O'Rourke's coat, and teetered crazily through the air.

Wiggins' head jerked back. The fingers of his left hand clutched like talons on the bar. His gun dangled from his trigger finger, but the finger went on convulsing. In death, he pulled three shots that were never fired.

A wicked smile ripped across his mouth as he slumped into the sawdust.

O'Rourke went back and looked at him, smelling no fight in the others, booted his gun. He laid a bleak gaze square on Sprague. "That gun came to him mighty fast," he grunted.

Crow's feet wrinkled out from the corners of Sprague's eyes. "So it did, marshal. Mighty fast."

"That gun came down the bar to him," O'Rourke stated.

The wolf smile never tightened upon Sprague's shrewd, devilish face. "Like you said, it was fast. It was too fast for me to see."

O'Rourke leaned an elbow on the bar. "Sprague, I have an idea you don't want law and order in this town."

Sprague had his big-knuckled hands atop the bar. He turned them over and then back flat, like pancakes. "Open and shut, O'Rourke. Not yore kind. You've made a fool out of my outfit three times in twenty-four hours. Yesterday you drove my handiest mule skinner off the range in shame. Today you done killed my best riding foreman. I won't count the killing where Yancey sided you."

"Mebbe you think I ought to be killed instead?" O'Rourke grated.

Sprague's eyes twinkled. His smile spread. "Now there, marshal, don't be putting ideas into my head!"

"Don't let them haze you," the marshal advised.

Sprague wagged his index finger at him. "I did not get my gray hairs being hazey, sonny! I will be sixty-eight come shortly. It would be a pity if you ain't hereabouts to come to my party."

"It would be a pity if you weren't yore-self," O'Rourke considered. His eyes narrowed a little. Then he put his back to Sprague and moved out where he could breathe clean air. Sprague had figured out that trick and built it and he had pushed the gun to Wiggins.

Heat formed in shimmering pools and spread. Glare ferreted out the deepest shadows. But no snores ripped mid-day's siesta hour. The marshal had broken the town's desire for sleep.

He moved slowly along the street, drifting casually in and out of bars. This day would offer the first mass test of his harsh authority. If any man wanted to make a play for glory, he had the excuse and opportunity. He could flaunt his gun and, simply by doing it, put O'Rourke at disadvantage.

The town waited and O'Rourke waited, but restless dissatisfaction drifted back through him. The game had gone stale and flat. He would play it out, but there was no fun left

in it. The mood grew on him. With day's first turn of heat he found himself walking toward the Staub's. He was watched and he knew it and he started to cover his trail. Then he stopped dead in his tracks with a harsh breathed, "You'd think I had something to be ashamed of! Or that she had reason to be ashamed of me."

His long jaw set hard and angular. He walked in from the front side of the street. She had heard all the details already, of course. It was the quick survey she gave him, and the instant relief that he bore no damage.

They moved into the dubious cool of the back garden for refreshments, and she sat there, carried on by her woman's inward thoughts. Out of the stream of them she asked abruptly, "O'Rourke, what is it that makes a person dead sure of how they feel—about another?"

He licked his lips. It was something he did not want to say, but he confronted it and forced it. "I suppose it is being dead sure about themselves."

Her brows wrinkled. "That is a pretty big order."

"Yes," he agreed.

The ease, the comfort of being with her, were gone. Bitterness corroded his blood and restlessness filled him. The girl was rock solid. But that wasn't enough. A man had to know himself for sure; he had to be dead sure about himself.

He waited a decent interval and then took his leave. The barrier of his own uncertainty had dropped between them. He cursed it. He cursed it with the bitterness of a man who is unendurably weary.

HE MOVED back uptown and watched the freshening of activity. The rustling of Ham's stock and the shooting of his rider had stirred up fresh temper and it was setting the mold of some as yet undecided action.

He moved down through the dropping shadows of the alley, footsteps soft in the deep dust. A plank fence ran around the space behind the Dublin and he caught drift of Luke Yancey's voice coming through. He seemed angered, but containing his anger.

"All right!" he growled. "The night riding was my idea, but I didn't know it was going to get this hot. Things' have happened—things are different."

There was a moment's silence and then Bat's scornful drawl. "Sure things are different—O'Rourke's come to town. You getting soft, kid?"

An explosive breath answered him. "No, I'm not getting soft, and I ain't letting you

down. But I'm pitching in my hand for a spell. I'm going to the ranch."

Sure, Kid," Bat muttered. Sure. Somebody's got to watch the home spread." O'Rourke could picture Bat Yancey dropping his gaze and looking at the dust between his boots. What about this new marshal and yore gal?"

"Forget her!" Luke's voice broke like a pistol shot. No indecision, no uncertainty, on that score.

"Yeah, I know how you feel," Bat growled. "Rough. But this O'Rourke could be taken care of and leave you in the clear."

"If I'm minded, I'll take care of him myself," Luke rasped. "Don't do me any favors I'm not asking for, Bat."

"Yore show, bucko!" A spit. A silence. The strike of a match. "Well, Kid, watch out for Ham. He's on the prod."

"Don't worry on me," Luke grunted.

They went back in. O'Rourke moved on along the alley. At a cross alley, he turned and passed through a wedge of heavy shadow and came out into sundown's crimson light. Luke Yancey came out of the Dublin down the street, his movements truculent with anger, the swing of his shoulders rough. He swung into leather and wheeled his horse and put it into that amazing getaway.

Not one in a hundred, O'Rourke thought with a horseman's admiration. *He spent a lot of time training that critter.*

It bothered him. He had seen killers who were crack riders and mustang breakers. But he had never seen a man with the snake streak who could gentle a horse and have it sure of him. And that horse was sure of Luke—dead sure.

O'Rourke's attention centered across the street. Harry Steller was sitting across there on a packing case, whittling a stick with great slashing strokes. But he wasn't thinking of what he was doing. His smoldering gaze was turned downstreet after Luke's hanging dust.

Sprague came along and stopped by him. Sprague's bleached, bright gaze followed the boy's "Thinking of a hoss, Harry?" he drawled.

The boy never broke the rhythm of his whittling. He never looked around. "I'm thinking of a man, Mr. Sprague."

"There's a lot of men on this range, Harry. A lot of men might even look alike at dawn."

"I could shut my eyes and know this man, Mr. Sprague. I'd know his smell. I'm thinking of the man who killed my pa."

Fine lines ran out in a web from the corner's of O'Rourke's eyes. The angles of the eyelids sharpened. He could feel for the boy. A sullen boy. Probably an abused boy. A

bad boy. But still a boy who had lost the only friend he knew.

O'Rourke cursed silently.

Saturday's raw hangovers were edged off. The town began to simmer down. He stood by Maxine's picket fence looking in, feeling—and irritated by the feeling—a marshal's regret that he could not call as a simple friend.

The mocking lilt of her voice came from right angles to him, "Slumming, marshal?"

His head wheeled. Almost silent, she was moving toward him from the trees, a challenge putting a glow into her eyes. He touched his hat and leaned an arm between the pickets. "There has been murder and mayhem whereabouts, Miss Maxine."

Her eyes hardened; but the scornful smile did not leave her mouth. "It is yore business, not mine."

"It touches you," he said severely.

The smile left her mouth then. A pretty mouth. A generous mouth. But a mouth that had learned to be very hard. "Nothing has ever touched me. If I had let it, I would be as driven as you."

His eyes narrowed. "I could close you down, Maxine."

She looked at him. Then forthright humor broke from the round column of her throat. "I am the last place in town you'd close down, O'Rourke."

"A taunt," he grunted. "What makes you think that?"

"Because I don't scare. Because not that or anything else would make me talk about men who have spent their money in my place. Because I have my own code the same as you have, O'Rourke, and because it is hard, but it is on the level—that is why."

He gave her a long stare, but it did not crack the cool mask of her face. He nodded beyond her shoulder. "I have never been in a place like yore's in my life to buy a drink, but one day I am coming in."

She shook her head. "Not you, O'Rourke."

She broke a glance of surprise out of him. "You wouldn't let me?"

"You wouldn't come in," she told him, and her eyes knew him. "You might stand outside and laugh or cry, but you would never come in—you have too much pride."

He swung from her without a word and went back to town.

CHAPTER SIX

Guts Play the Man

THE MAIN drag was quiet. It stayed quiet until late Wednesday night when the fast drum of a horse sounded from the trail and was slowed to a canter as it came

into town. The rancher, Ham, rode in and racked on Sprague's side of the street. Across the way, one of Bat Yancey's men watched him motionlessly across the top of a batwing door.

O'Rourke waited an interval and then locked his cubbyhole of an office and sauntered down to Sprague's bar. The old wolf was there, passing the time with drinks that never seemed to affect him in the slightest. The rancher stood at mid-bar, pouring a fresh drink when O'Rourke came in. The marshal noted his glass has already made three rings on the wood.

The man was breathing a little fast and some inward excitement put criss-crosses of red upon his leathered cheeks. A hard shine was in his eyes and behind it lay brooding anger, vengeance, a violently ebbing and flowing doubt, and the reasons behind his fast ride.

O'Rourke signaled a drink and was trying to fathom a hard working rancher's mid-week visit to town at this hour when a second horse sent its tattoo reaching along the trail. It came full tilt into town and up the street and a rider hit dirt without bothering to rack it. He sang into the Dublin bar, "Bat, cross over here!" and, without waiting for an answer, banged in the doors.

It was Luke Yancey, jaw set like a sledge, red lights in his eyes. He rolled into the center of the room with his stiff gait and stood glaring at Ham with his thumbs resting on his belts. High heels pounded on the steps in front and Bat burst in, followed by three men.

Luke growled bluntly, "Ham, come out of it! I rode with yore dust in my face all the way into town."

The rancher turned sidewise to the bar. "What do you expect to find on trail, Luke Yancey? I rode in with dust in my nose too. What are you trying to get at?"

"This!" Luke snapped on a deadly note. He took off his hat and jammed a finger through two bullet holes. "A little love note some hombre cooing around our corral sent me when I went out a while ago."

The rancher spat into the sawdust. "What would I be doing at yore corral? It is my beef I been lookin' for!"

"Mebbe," Bat drawled on a flinty note, "you figured hosses might even up, Ham."

Color raced into the rancher's face. "You ever hear of me ever doing any longriding, Yancey?"

Sprague let his glass tap twice upon the bar. He said, "Yancey's—both of you—Ham here may get roiled once in a while, but he ain't the kind to turn to hoss stealing and you know it."

Luke glared at the floor. "By God, it was

his dust I trailed," he growled. He lifted his hot glare and swung it upon Sprague. "You, you old timber wolf, if it was yore dust, I'da come in shooting!"

Sprague's lips lifted over fanglike, rotted teeth. "If it was me, you wouldn't have smelled that dust at all, Luke."

O'Rourke could feel the pools of suspicion, hate and fight forming. Nobody was ready to fight this out yet, but they were liable to talk themselves into a fight, and it might be the wrong men fighting. He said plainly, "Boys, this is mid-week, but that gun rule still holds."

The rancher shot him a high tempered glare. "You think I'm going to drop my iron with that wild galoot toting some cracked idea and his hardware?"

"I think yo're both going to," O'Rourke grunted quietly. His hand was just as quiet. The click of his gun was the first evidence it was drawn.

Luke Yancey stared at him a moment, stared back at Ham, stared at Sprague, and then growled, "Hell!" and jerked a motion at his brother and pegged out to the Dublin.

O'Rourke looked at the rancher. "You aim to stay in town tonight?"

"Not after my business with Sprague," the rancher grunted. He swung his attention to Sprague. "'Less you figure I might have company on the way home?"

O'Rourke told him grimly, "You'll have no company from town, I'll see to that. I'll see you get an hour."

The rancher swung back, his temper cooling, and leaned a dust-stained elbow on the bar. He gave the marshal a long, contemplative look. "Yo're a tough man, O'Rourke. And square about it. It is too bad you got here too late."

"Too late for what?" O'Rourke asked.

The rancher snorted through his hairy nose and poured a fresh drink. "Too late to save my steers. And some other things."

Sprague gave his wolf grin. He did not have a soft voice; it was gritty. But it was low, with a devilish mocking roll that hid its whiplash and its harshness. He said now, "Don't go spoiling the marshal's fun, Ham. Can't you see from sign he's danged near cleaned up the town?"

"Yup. Everything but the trouble," Ham nodded.

O'Rourke finished his drink and drifted. Out on the stoop, he stopped and drew out a twisted black cigar, and deliberately snipped its end with his hard teeth. A soft, regular sloughing sound came from the deep shadows to one side. Piercing them he found Harry Steller sitting there, whittling.

"Kinda chilly out here, Harry," he remarked and put a light to his cigar.

"I ain't chilly, Mr. O'Rourke," the boy answered sullenly. The tempo of his whittling never broke. "I got thoughts to keep me hot."

"What thoughts, Harry?"

"I'm thinking of a man, Mr. O'Rourke. The man that killed my pa."

O'Rourke gave him a sharp glance. "Don't you go berserk in my town, boy."

"I ain't going to get the wrong man, Mr. O'Rourke," the boy growled. "Don't worry on me none!" He stopped whittling and the turn of his face made a pale blur in the dark. "Ham all right?"

"Yes, he's all right," the marshal grunted. "You know him well?"

"No more than middling," the boy said. "But him and Mr. Sprague are the only two ever done us a decent turn in this basin. He's a good man, Mr. Ham."

O'Rourke shook his head and started down the steps. Starved and scorned and cuffed and kicked, likely even by his pa, what could you expect of a boy except that he'd become a bad dog? He turned down the walk, a blur of shadow moving through the islands of dim mid-week light. Midway to the apex of the two streets, he melted into shadow. He let his cigar go cold and stood there with the high country chill slowly laying its blankets upon him.

IN PERHAPS an hour, Ham came out of the bar and paused to speak to the boy, and shortly the boy got his horse from down the block and rode out in company with Ham. O'Rourke moved down as far as the freight yard and crossed over and took a new position. In time, the two Yanceys and two Yancey riders came out of the Dublin and stopped on the steps.

Bat growled, "You should have chopped him down before he got to town."

Luke cursed. "All right," he grated, irritable at some argument. "But I didn't. You going to shoot poker all night?"

"I'll be around," Bat said.

"Well I'm going down to Maxine's and get some music. I reckon I'll stay if she's got room."

Bat gave a rough laugh. Luke cursed him and moved to his horse. Bat turned back inside with the two riders.

Luke came down the street at a walk, his pony's dainty hoofs making a bare pad in the night. But Luke didn't take the street to Maxine's; he took the other. O'Rourke swore at himself mildly for letting him get off on Ham's trail and moved out to watch him. Luke was smoking, and the arc of his cigarette cut a clear red dot against the darkness, and he made no effort to push his horse.

Midway of the block, he drew rein and sat

watching, and O'Rourke realized he was watching the dark Staub house. For the space of his cigarette he sat motionless, and then O'Rourke saw the cigarette hurled and sparks fly—an act which coming from a range rider showed something close to berserk anger. He turned back then, putting his horse into a brisk trot, rounded the corner, and at Maxine's rode around and put his horse in the sheds.

Two hours later, Maxine's voice had lifted Luke Yancey's black and bitter mood and his voice was in the small chorus drifting from her shuttered house. Two of the Yancey riders left town with a man from Lazy Bell, and Bat Yancey was apparently set for the night in a four handed game of poker.

Sprague came out with three riders and stood on the clapwalk, stretching, before moving to his horse. His vulture eyes picked O'Rourke's motionless figure out of the deepest shadow across the way. "No use freezing, marshal," he chuckled. "You've done tamed this town already."

"Kinda looks so," O'Rourke admitted, irked at Sprague's sharp sight. The group rode out past Maxine's toward Sprague's near ranch on the basin rim. Only one deadfall and the two bars and Doc Wheelers remained open. O'Rourke yawned and headed for the hotel. He came awake when Bat Yancey and Doc Wheeler pounded along the hall and yawned good nights. And later he awakened for no reason that he could figure, and was dimly conscious of horse movement out on range.

He recalled that when Harry Steller brought Ham's body in across his saddle the next morning. The rancher had been shot in the head, close up—there was a powder burn. Before Steller opened his mouth, O'Rourke guessed that he had been gunned beside his range fire while he slept.

The boy was sullen, taciturn, and his eyes were molten. Ham had said he'd hire him and begin him that night riding herd. He had been on the far side of the herd, maybe three miles down valley, when he heard the shot. It was the first thing he heard and the only thing except the fast getaway of a horse.

The shooting had come around dawn. It was not more than three hours' ride to the valley even at a walk, and it was now eleven o'clock. O'Rourke gave the boy a searching look. "Why didn't you bring him right in?"

"I was smelling around," Harry Steller said, but resistance to questioning was in his tone. "Ain't any law agin that, is there?"

O'Rourke let him go. He fell back in the crowd when he was able; he let the crowd forget him. He looked over the range bunch left in town. Bat Yancey, a couple of his

riders, a sprinkling of small ranchers and range drifters attached to the Yancey or Sprague camps. A half a dozen sure-fire honest ranchers, honestly mad about Ham's murder, but sensing things building to a blazing smash that might ruin them, and keeping their mouths shut. Sprague rode while the excitement was on.

Sprague was not the kind to need telling. He took one look and knew. He swung his hawk's gaze speculatively on Bat Yancey. He asked softly, "Where's yore brother, Bat?"

Yancey's eyes were hard. Dull hard. "What's it to you?"

"Just curious," the old wolf grunted. He looked around the ranchers afoot below him, shrewd with his senses, keening the precise boil of their feelings. "Ham, here, had kind of put his interests alongside mine. I reckon it is up to me to see this score is evened."

Yancey's eyes narrowed to oblong slits. "You declaring war, Sprague? Open war?"

Sprague gave his soft, gritty chuckle. "Bat, you know me better'n that! When I declare war, my opening words will be forty guns barking. But I reckon I better count head on what outfits side my grass, jist in case things get rough on range."

Light struck in flat shafts from his eyes. "I said range, marshal, on account of you've got this town so quieted down a body don't have to worry."

"Too quiet," O'Rourke grunted. "Looks like I better move out on range and fan some of this trouble in where we can see it."

Sprague's face sharpened; the cold humor left it. Yancey swung his head and there was no mockery in his face. Sprague considered, "Don't seem to be like I ever heard a marshal's authority went beyond town."

"It don't," O'Rourke granted. He lifted his head suddenly. "In a territory, it don't rightly run in town, either. But there ain't nothing to stop me as a citizen getting in a range war."

Yancey stared through the hard mask of his face. "Which side, O'Rourke?"

O'Rourke took his gun out and waggled it. "My side," he stated. He looked at them both. Then he turned and went to his office. There was a back way out and, he used it and went down to Maxine's.

SHE threw no mockery at him this day. She said, "He's not here, O'Rourke."

He nodded grimly. He had seen Luke's horse was not in the shed. He said, "You must like murder. Or the men who do it."

"No," she said. Her brow creased. "No, I hate it. But there is something I don't get—" She raised her head sharply. "I haven't

been in on this, O'Rourke! You don't think that?"

"No," he told her flintily. "But I'm surprised it matters to you." He scowled at her for a space. "I don't suppose there's anything you want to tell me?"

She shook her head, but at some inward thought, not his question. "I know Luke. He's tough, he's been trying to live up to his brother, but he's no night rider!"

"Suppose," O'Rourke said grimly, "I told you I had heard him as good as admit some of this mayhem?"

She stared at him. "Luke? O'Rourke, you must be wrong. At least this time. He fell asleep in the parlor and he stayed there until Bat wakened him and they routed me out with their racket getting breakfast. Then he got sore about something and lit for the ranch."

He studied her. She wasn't lying, and she wasn't covering. But she had been asleep herself in another room. A man with a fast horse could have sneaked out and gotten back without her knowing it.

"All right," he said at last. "I'll take yore word for it."

She gave him a long look. "O'Rourke, you would not think much of yoreself if you forced a fight with the wrong man and killed him."

He tensed and pivoted, swung back around the house and made his way up the alley to the stable. He saddled up and led his horse outside and went into the hotel to get extra bullets.

Chambra was waiting for him in the lobby, a whiteness in her face and with her eyes large and bright. He took off his hat and led her to a corner. "O'Rourke," she said directly, "they've sent word to the range to come in for Ham's funeral."

He watched her and waited.

"And they are talking it up that Luke killed him, O'Rourke. They got hold of Harry Steller and got it out of him that it had been a fast horse again."

His face was like cold lava. "What do you think?"

Her face dropped. Her hands pulled against each other like taut lariats. "I don't know! It has been so tough, so brutal, on both sides! Steller was a little different—he was a bushwhacker himself for Sprague. But Ham never did a thing that was not square. I can't believe Luke—" Her voice broke.

He pressed her hands. "Sometimes murder gets to be a thirst." He thought a moment. He said, "Wait here."

He went down to Sprague's freight yard where they were building a casket and took a close look at the corpse. The talk had taken an ugly tone. Bloodlust was rising

through the pack. It wanted blood, it wanted a lynching, it wanted a riot—something, anything, to let off steam.

He came out with a puzzled look, but kept his counsel and went back to the girl. "Did Luke ever carry any gun but that fancy forty?" he asked.

"It's the only one I ever saw him wear. His grandfather gave it to him. It was like his own hand."

O'Rourke scowled. "Ham wasn't killed with a .40. The wound is clear and I'd swear on it." He looked straight at her. "What's wrong here, Chambra?"

She shook her head miserably. "I don't know! I only know they're working up to lynching Luke, and it will start guns going all over. It will not be one murder, it will be fifty! Sprague will see to that if Bat doesn't."

His lips compressed, his eyes were stormy. It was a damned snake's nest.

"You go home," he said, "and stay there until I come for you."

He watched her walk out into evening's slanting light. Her shoulders were straight, her tread steady, resolute. A woman whose love a man was lucky to have.

HE SAW to his gun, tested his holster, and went back to the street. Sprague was in his saddle at the freight yard, face intent now, watchful, scheming—counting the heads that would be with him; judging the ones who would stretch Luke Yancey's neck, or watch it stretched, but turn around and side with Bat. He had championed Ham, but actually, Ham didn't matter to him except as an excuse to turn the full violence of the range on the Yancey spread. The way he was thinking was clear as day; almost, O'Rourke could hear his thoughts like the ticking of a clock.

They finished the casket and loaded Ham's body in, and hoisted it upon a wagon bed. They were backing horses to the wagon pole when the bawl of cattle sounded, and a bunch of white-nosed dogies bearing the lazy H brand came jogging into town. A rider darted out of the dust cloud and froze them up the street away, and rode back to face the suddenly silent crowd.

It was Luke, anger spattering inside him like molten lead, but covered with an unyielding lid of containment. He glared at Bat, but it was hard to tell if it was personal or his general temper. Bat's face was tinged with gray and his eyes shiny. Both men's emotions were running high.

Luke growled, "Well, there's Ham's steers. They were drifting around in Chick Gulch and now I hope there's a finish to this!"

O'Rourke was trying to watch everyone at once. He caught sight of Harry Steller

astride his gaunt horse at the edge of the crowd. The boy's eyes were smoldering on Luke. Something shifted behind Bat's tight expression, like the abrupt shift of a rock upon a hill. Sprague's shrewd mind was racing, judging the effect of this. He said abruptly, "A hell of a lot of good that is after he's dead."

Luke drifted his gaze to the casket with faint surprise. "Who killed him?"

"A man with a fast hoss with a fast get-away," Sprague grunted. "Shot in his sleep, Luke."

O'Rourke called out, "Hold on there, Sprague!"

A hard-breathing, wild-eyed rancher yelled, "Hold on, nothin'! You keep out of this, O'Rourke."

"What are we waiting for?" another yelled. "He's our man!"

Luke was backing off. "What the—" he shouted, voice raw with anger and truculence, but edged with perplexity.

Somebody was circling a rope. O'Rourke was pushing his horse in. Sprague's eyes came at him like silver bullets.

Sprague said, "Get that damned marshal trussed!"

The rope switched its circle and dropped over O'Rourke. Bat yelled to Luke and a gun barked. The air was suddenly filled with yells, gunfire, the pound of hoofs and grunt of moving horses. The rope burned around O'Rourke like a hot iron hoop and he was snapped from his saddle and dumped with a head-splitting impact. Dazed, he was down in dirt with holering, fighting, milling men pounding over him. A horse knocked against his head; another screamed and crashed down atop of him. His head was full of fire, his lungs full of dust. He couldn't move.

His senses cleared as the sound of gunfire moved away, but with yells and the song and whang of bullets going on steadily. He shook his head and realized he had sprained his hip and had no idea where his horse was. But he could hobble and he still had his gun.

The melee had turned to a pitched battle, with the two sides fighting from their own sides of the street above. Here and there a hump of shadow was solid against the lesser darkness of the street. All lights were out, and orange black flame stabbed out of darkness. He saw a man crawling, saw a man pitch from a roof into an alley, and a fire had started in the back of one of Sprague's deadfalls.

It was the Dublin O'Rourke had to reach. The battle could blow itself out or rage all night, but he had to get his hands on Luke Yancey and find out about those steers, and some other things. He pulled himself up and hobbled across and through the alley by the tallow works and up the alley behind. Nervous

horses were stretched along here, whinnying, capering, nostrils flaring.

He went in through a door in the Dublin fence and found the black horse inside with the others. He shouldered through, caught the sting of splinters from a stray bullet and dove through the back door with a brass lamp crashing down beside him. A man was rolling a barrel out toward the front and suddenly flung upward with a hoarse, startled grunt, clawed at his throat, and fell awkwardly over the barrel.

A wild yell went up in front, the crackle of fire tripled. There was the sudden, shattering din of dynamite and a violent blaze of light. A man screamed and another sobbed, and the raw curses of gunmen at this play ripped through the racket. He got to the front door and spotted the Yanceys barricaded now on the stoop.

O'Rourke made a low run for it with bullets kicking under his heels and came up flat on his belly beside Luke Yancey. Luke shot him a hot, molten look and rasped, "This tough enough for you to tame, O'Rourke?"

Heavy slugs began to chunk the table top in front of them with regularity. O'Rourke saw a rifleman kneeling on a roof, took careful aim and his first shot brought the man tumbling down.

"No favors from you, mister!" Luke grated. But a shade of admiration for O'Rourke's shooting was in his tone. "What are doing with us?"

"I want to know where Ham's stock was," O'Rourke yelled above the racket.

Luke stopped shooting and turned to looked square at him. "What would you aim to do even if you knew?"

"Trail Ham's murderer."

Luke turned back to shooting. Intermittently, they could see Sprague across the way, a rifle in his hands but his attention was on marshaling his forces, his wolf face wild with vicious glee.

"I thought I was Ham's murderer," Luke yelled back. "The others too!"

"Mebbe you are," O'Rourke rasped. "But mebbe you aren't. That is what I want to know!"

Luke's lips flattened back against his teeth in a humorless grin. "Learn for yoreself, mister."

Another dynamite package came hurtling through the air and blasted the space in front of them. Bat rolled over and came up, breathing hard. He looked at O'Rourke, and there was a vicious expression in his eyes. He elbowed his brother. "Whatcha told that law-dog?"

"Go to hell," Luke answered. He put his attention on slamming two of Sprague's killers out of a window.

"H AM knew the answer," O'Rourke rasped. "You know it, Luke Yancey! Spit it before you begin spitting blood."

A hoarse yell came from behind them. The window was busted out and he caught a scene of mixed and violent struggle against a rising wall of fire. Bat cursed in a raw voice. "Get moving, Luke. They've gotten behind us!"

The three of them crouched and jumped through the window, piling with shoulders, elbows and gun lashes through the tumbling crowd. There were maybe eight of Sprague's men in the bar with more dropping down from a roof hole. The back wall had caught fire and, beyond it, horses were raising a frightened rumpus.

Bat lifted his trail call and yelled, "Bar Y into Doc Wheelers!" He smashed his gun down on a Sprague man and dove through the frame of flame around the back door. Luke pounded after him with O'Rourke.

They came up in the yard with men and horses milling all around them. A horse had kicked part of the back fence down. They started for Doc Wheelers back door, and another blast of dynamite went off close by. In the sheet of light, O'Rourke caught a man with pistol plumb on Luke from a shed roof. It spat orange and Luke cursed and hit at the sting in his left shoulder. The man leered and gave a wild laugh and had Luke beaded dead when O'Rourke's slug smashed his head.

A terrific wave of close fighting carried the burning wall through and spilled men down on top of them. There was a wild scramble and then somebody's shrill, thin voice—Harry Steller's—was screaming, "Drop, Mr. O'Rourke! He's beaded you!"

O'Rourke dropped in his tracks and a bullet creased his head as he went down. He turned his face, dizzy and with the earth heaving up at him, and saw Yancey swing his gun onto the boy, nearly blast him from his saddle, and then leap up on the rearing black horse and tear out into the alley.

The boy pulled himself around in the saddle. Part of his left side was blown away, but there was no least sign of pain upon his face. His lips were hard against his teeth in a wild, wicked grin and, with a crazed fire in his eyes, he took out after the black horse.

O'Rourke struggled to his knees, slammed a man down with his pistol and struggled through to the back. The last of the horses tore out ahead of him. The building was burning high now and he gave a quick look back, but saw no sign of either Yancey. He stumbled out into the alley, and where a slash of light cut through, saw the black horse galloping, and the boy struggling behind. There was a space and then Bat Yancey's yellow and white horse surrounded by a free running

bunch. The yellow horse turned into the front street where the blaze of light broke through.

O'Rourke thought grimly of the boy. Crazy as hell, wicked as hell, but he had saved his life. He'd never catch Luke Yancey's horse, but even if he did, it would cost him his life.

O'Rourke pivoted and made his way through the back door of his office and came out front with a shotgun. He took his position at the end of a stoop and began to pepper the blazing part of the street. He shot steadily, carefully, isolating the bad actors as much as he could.

Suddenly Sprague's voice lifted in the wild yell of his outfit. The firing fell off, came sporadically and died. He called up street, "That you, O'Rourke, sending them bees?"

"That's me!" O'Rourke barked back. "You had enough?"

Sprague took time to think it over. "Where're the Yanceys?" he yelled out. Calls came from various sections. A man yelled hoarsely, "Bat lit out."

"So did Luke," O'Rourke called.

Sprague came out upon a stoop, letting his gun butt to the floor. "Then what we fighting about? Come in here you Sprague men, those of you who can crawl!"

The last of the fighting died. Men came lurching and crawling out of shadows from all sides. The feel of ugliness, of viciousness, of bloodlust, ran out like a tide. For three hours or better they had floundered through broken heads and running guts, and for the time, their violence was sated. For now, at least, they had had enough.

O'Rourke moved out in the middle of the street and walked forward, lightning still playing through the storm in his eyes. He stopped square on to Sprague and growled, "This is intermission. Patch yore men up."

Sprague looked at him with a face that suddenly showed his age, but a wild, conscienceless humor crept into his eyes. "Still see a tough or two to knock down, marshal? Yo're a hard man, O'Rourke!" His lips peeled back over those stained and rotted fangs. He waved a gesture at the scene of death and hurt and mayhem. "Ain't that enough to suit you?"

"No," O'Rourke said on a harsh note. "There are still the bosses of this trouble." He laid his stare on Sprague and held it there. The light died in Sprague's eyes, and his face dropped; he sat down right in his tracks.

"Water," he rasped, almost querulously. "Water, one of you boys, I'm dead spent."

O'Rourke turned away.

Chambra stood on the hotel stoop where she had walked with him, straight and proud. Not a tear washed upon her eye, not a sorrow showed in her tone. "I heard, O'Rourke. It was Luke, wasn't it? A bushwhack, and then he ran out?"

He gave a single nod.

She looked down and to her side, and gave one small blow of her nose. "Well, then that seems to prove things. What will you do now?"

"Put my challenge out upon the range," he said, "for him to come in and meet me man to man by sundown, or forever after call himself a coward."

"He will have to or else run out," she murmured. "The range will tolerate anything, but not a coward." She looked up and smiled and touched cool, gentle fingers to his face. "Good night now!"

HE BOWED gravely, and waited for her father to come fetch her, then moved, sore of muscle and bone, upstairs. He threw the window up and stood there looking out upon the plumes of smoke rising like pencil marks against the yellowing sky.

The leaders are still here, but I have whipped the toughness from the town, he thought. And today will take care of what is left. But where is the satisfaction in it? What have I accomplished that I have not done fifty times before? I have tamed the town, but I have still found no rest.

He lay down then and went to sleep. He had a healthy man's robust vitality. He awakened precisely at four and his body was completely refreshed. It was near five and the sun was wheeling across the lower quarter of the sky when he stepped out on the street and walked through the scene of wreckage and devastation.

Somebody was riding in Maxine's street with a pack horse following. But it was the other street his eye was suddenly dead set upon . . . a single rider was coming up out of the gulch upon a yellow and white patched horse.

At the apex of the streets, O'Rourke stopped to squint. Word was running toward him like a breeze, "Luke Yancey!" He stood there waiting, watched the man dismount and come toward him afoot—a man coming with the slow, oiled step of one coming to meet a challenge—a man coming to a duel.

For this moment, the flame kindled up in O'Rourke again. He was a fighting man, and a fighting man's instincts were in him strong. He felt the warm flow of his blood, the grim violence of his kind came up through him. This was a snake, a man who had sneaked and murdered others, and tried to shoot him from the back. But a man with a gun in his hand and death in the gun if O'Rourke's timing went wrong.

He could see the light of Yancey's eyes now. If there was nervousness in him, he did not show it. He came steadily with his gun hanging in his hand. His head was dropped

slightly, so that he looked up from under the shadow of his eyebrows, and partially from the sides of his eyes.

The sun, O'Rourke thought; that glaring ball of red fire right behind him. Coming out of that sun, O'Rourke would look like a vague shadow to the other man, but he had no slightest pity, no sense of remorse at what was happening. The man could have ridden in earlier that day and called him out; he could have ridden around town himself and come out of the sun.

A sharp ejaculation from someone on the other street came to him. "It's Bat Yancey?" they exploded.

Luke Yancey was still a hundred yards away. O'Rourke darted a glance across the freight yard. Hastings, the rancher, was riding up that other street into sight with his lead horse. The lead horse was Luke Yancey's black. Over its back, a blanket pack was tied in a diamond hitch . . . a pack holding the shape of a man's body.

"Found the horse standing up by Little Creek. Bat's foot was tied to the horn with just enough rope to drag him."

Somebody said excitedly, "Open the pack!"

"No," Hastings growled with distaste. "We had better leave him in the blanket."

O'Rourke's attention went back to Luke Yancey. Then this would be both of them—of that much trouble, the range would be shet! His lips pulled a little tighter with grim satisfaction. His job was at an end, or near it.

Something darted like a swallow past the corner of his other eye. He heard the low sob, and then saw Chambrá running. Chambrá running and with tears upon her cheeks, her mouth a torn and cruel oval in her face—running with outstretched arms to Luke. But from where she came, she had not seen nor heard what Hastings said, yet she was running her arms around Luke Yancey's neck unabashed and crying, "Luke—Luke you can't even see into that sun! He'll kill you!"

Luke dropped his head once for a nod. "Probably. But he sent a challenge and an insult."

She turned desperately toward O'Rourke. She made a gesture with one hand. "You see, O'Rourke, the iron wasn't in me! I love him. I don't even care if he murders a man!"

O'Rourke called out "Stop! Stop and stand, Luke Yancey!" The girl had made a fool of him over Yancey, and black scalding hatred ripped through him on that score alone.

But something else was blazing through his head. Luke Yancey had come to meet him for an insult that was meant for Bat—come without denial, and with a gun in hand. Come knowing O'Rourke was the better man, and walking straight into a blazing sunset on top of that!

That wasn't the way of a sneak and a murdering man, and it was odd that his brother Bat had taken his horse the night before when his own horse was right beside it.

Luke had stopped and was quietly putting the girl's arms from around him. His head was still tilted, and there was a squeeze to his eyes. He was walking to his death, and knew it, but he was going to make a fight of it as best he could.

"Do you know yore brother was rope-hauled to his death?" O'Rourke called out.

Luke Yancey nodded. Not an expression changed upon his face. "The boy came by and told me. The boy was crazy and rode off into the hills. He said he smelled Bat—" Luke broke off short, his mouth set.

"Smelled Bat last night when he took the shot at my back just the way he smelled the night he caught the Stellers flat?" O'Rourke stared hard. He knew that was what the boy had said.

Luke muttered metallically, "Whatever he did, he was paid now."

"Yo're part of it," O'Rourke grated. "It was yore hoss he used. You figured the switch to cover tracks."

Luke shrugged. "Let's get on with this."

O'Rourke had stopped with his feet spread, his balance careful, and now his head hung forward and shook from side to side like a bull's. "You didn't know he took yore hoss from Maxine's," he suddenly shouted. "Not until he came in and waked you."

Luke cursed. He said, "I'm here and you called me. I'm coming on and raising my hand, O'Rourke!"

He started forward again, determined, unyielding, playing his guts to the very end of the sheer sake of them.

NEVER in his life had O'Rourke wavered in the iron pride of his gunmanship and manhood, but he did it now. He lifted his right hand and wigwagged and, pivoting, walked out of the fight. "They will be needing a new marshal here," he sang back across his shoulder. "Luke Yancey—you would make a right good man."

A shot roared out and rolled against his back, but there was no impact of a bullet, no whistling of the air. He heard a scrape and then the clatter of a gun and wheeled around. Upon a shed roof of the freight yards, Sprague

was clawing at his chest. He came up straight in a grim and terrible tautness and then pitched over the edge where his heavy .45 carbine lay.

Smoke was curling from Luke's gun. He made a motion of explanation. "Hell bent to get whichever of us won," he grunted. "That would have left Sprague king."

O'Rourke grinned and then chuckled. He was still chuckling when he got his horse and rode out. But beneath the chuckle he was feeling raw and miserable. Another trail, another town—where did it get a man?

He came by Maxine's and reined up to look in. Maxine was leaning in her doorway, smoking. Mockery was on the broad, hard bow of her lips and irony in her eyes.

"Like I said," she called out to him. "There is a gentleness in you, O'Rourke, for all that you are very hard and very good. You should have learned it twenty years ago!"

"Fifteen," he corrected sharply.

She made a gesture. "Will you stop in?"

He shook his head.

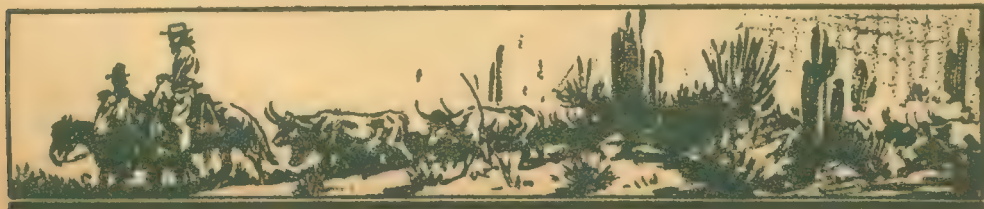
She laughed—a laugh edged with scorn for the pride and arrogance of men. "Like I said," she told him again. Curiosity came into her face. "What will you do now, O'Rourke?"

He was smiling now. Smiling with lips unaccustomed to this expression. Smiling with devils in his eyes instead of storms and lightning. And the hardness was cracking on her face. There was something very young, very untouched under it—something that had never been touched by any man before.

He said, "Will you ride with me, Maxine? It is a ranch we'll have, and it will take more than I have now—but no more than I will promise. I have only six hundred dollars."

"O'Rourke!" she cried on a fuzzed and strangled note, and then ran toward him without a backward look, without even bothering to shut the door. "Oh O'Rourke, yo're a hard man to tell it that way! Who would do it but a brute?"

"You, Maxine," he said and smiled as he pulled her into saddle with his strong hand. "You," he repeated and chuckled a little, and the tight driving dissatisfaction of the years dropped out of him. He knew where peace would lie, and it was in him now. As he found that sweetness no other man had ever touched upon her lips, his hard eyes softened with a tear.





Johnny threw a shot and missed.

**By
Rolland
Lynch**

THE roads were ribbons of dust through the valley's mesquite and bunch grass and here they came together and formed a hub. Coyote Creek cut its lazy loop around this center and made of it a verdant spot. The plain stretched away to either side and was bound on the East by the jagged Broken Horse Hills and to the West towered Marlowe's Range. The valley ran long in the other directions and the water and the grass were good. From the south crept the fences of the nesters and to the north, Curt Dupere, owner of the Jinglebit iron, hired cowboys who were quick with a gun and rough with their fists—and deaf to the wails of the women and children belonging to the men who strung wire and planted crops.

To the hub where these roads crossed came Johnny Single. He had quit his mount and looped the reins over his arm and studied the situation. There was deep thought in him and the decision he toyed with tugged at the lids of his eyes. He liked what he saw and made his decision. He was a simple man so he gave a simple name to his place—the Cross Roads. It was the cross roads of his life. He was through with roaming. His winter and most of his summer's pay was in his levis' pocket and he had seen the barbed wire creeping up the valley. In his straightforward way he knew that the sun was setting on the large ranch owners, the men who had ruled as feudal barons over vast domains held by right of might. And in his straightforward-

CROSS ROADS

ness he saw the possibilities of a town's beginning here at this hub; a town built around the store he would erect. Here he would lay his gun aside forever and be content. A man had to look to the future. He had seen too many soon graves and broken bronc busters and branding men sweating out the loneliness of the range year after year—and for what? He had hired out his gun and lasso for the last time. This was for him. He staked out his quarter section and made the long ride to Las Cruces.

There he traded his fine roping horse, saddle, pistol and some boot for a team and wagon. Careful of his money, he bought raw lumber, tar paper and a rifle. Old Sol of the Mercantile helped him select the goods most likely to be in demand in his store and Johnny Single piled it all in his wagon and went back to the homestead. There he labored through the days and into the nights. He got his place up and the foodstuffs on the shelves. The store smelled of tar paper and crackers and flour and it was a good smell. And this day he put up his sign over the door—**THE CROSS ROADS**. He was ready for business.

He was tugging a flour barrel to a new place against the counter when the sound of horses splashing across Coyote Creek came to him. His first customers. He straightened and scrubbed the palms of his hands on his thighs. Then he stepped from the doorway, as the three men drew rein before his store.

The man in the center was big. He sat his horse with the austerity of a king. His cotton shirt was open at the throat and the sun had branded a mahogany V there on his chest. The heaviness of his body was in his face and in his movements and he was obviously a man accustomed to giving orders and having them obeyed. The two men flanking him had their eyes for Johnny Single, but their ears were for the big man they sided.

"What you got in there?" asked the big man.

"Everything," said Johnny. "You want to buy something?"

The man rested his hands on the horn of his saddle and he looked past Johnny at the store. When his eyes came back, he said, "You sell matches?"

Johnny nodded and went back into the

store. There was a tightness in him that made him glance at his rifle there against the far wall. He got a box of matches down from the shelf and went back outside. He handed them up to the man, naming his price.

The man fished into his doleskin trousers and brought out several coins. He picked out the correct amount and handed it down to Johnny. He passed the box of matches to the small puncher to his left. Then he said to Johnny, "Friend, you've done a lot of work here for nothing. You can't stay. This's my land and your store will draw those nesters. They'll be stretching up this way. You should have asked me about that."

This, then, was Curt Dupere. He looked down at Johnny in a cold way that brought the blood surging into Johnny's cheeks. A simmering heat got into Johnny and he said, "Since when do I have to ask you about what I do on free government land?"

Curt Dupere rocked a little in his saddle, shifting his ponderous weight in the stirrups. The two men either side of him studied Johnny with a keen interest.

Curt said, "You should have talked to me and saved your time and money. This's my land. I've grazed it for fifteen years. I won't have it fenced. Possession is the thing that counts. I've got possession."

Johnny's lips drew together stubbornly. "Had possession," he corrected. "I filed on this place legally and it's mine. There'll be a town here, Mr. Dupere, and you're standing on the main street right now."

Slowly, Curt Dupere shifted his eyes from Johnny to the store again. A half aroused amusement pulled at his mouth. He spoke to the man to whom he had handed the matches: "Burn it, Snake. Burn the town down."

The man swung from his horse. Johnny lunged forward, reaching for him, saying, "Hold on now, you—"

Curt Dupere spurred his horse forward into Johnny. There was a brutal, gray satisfaction in that heavy face. The horse caught Johnny with his chest and dealt a stunning blow. The man to Curt's right whipped out a pistol and brought the barrel down sharply across Johnny's neck even as he was spinning away from the animal.

Johnny went down beneath milling horses'

Some men took the left road and some took the right—but Johnny Single came to the cross roads of his life and decided to make it his home—or his grave!

feet, grasping hard at a filmy thread of consciousness. A hoof caught him in the side and a roaring blackness swept over him. His last sensation was the taste of sour and bitter dust in his throat.

WHEN Johnny returned to consciousness he was all wet. He coughed and spluttered and spat. He opened his eyes just in time to catch the full force of another bucket of water in his face. He pawed at his eyes and sat up with a groan. He was about to curse his tormentor, but choked the words back at sight of the girl. Her horse was grazing idly by the creek.

She was standing over him, the last of the water in the bucket dripping on his legs as she stared down at him. There was a dark smudge on her cheek and the edges of her auburn hair were singed and curled. There were dark burned spots on her plaid shirt and streaks of black on her levis. A wisp of smoke stung Johnny's nostrils. "The store!" he muttered and surged up.

Johnny would have fallen if it had not been for her helping arm. He leaned heavily against her and stared at the ruin.

The tar paper was gone, burned off. The framing stood gaunt and charred against the afternoon sky. Parts of the counter were scorched and the foodstuffs in cardboard boxes were broken, their contents spilled into tiny mounds. Several shelves were down and the goods lumped on the floor. Bolts of gingham showed frayed, burned ends.

"I saw the smoke," said the girl, "and got here as quickly as I could. I couldn't haul enough water to put out the fire so I salvaged as much stuff as I could, then threw the water on you. Was it Dupere?"

Johnny saw then the pile she had salvaged. There was the reason for those smudges on her clothes and skin and how her hair had become singed.

"I'm very grateful to you, Miss—"

"Martha Worth."

"Johnny Single is grateful," he repeated. "It was Dupere."

Johnny looked at her, really seeing her for the first time. Her emotions had stung color into her cheeks. A red stain showed through the delicate tan of her face. Her long lashes were lowered. The brown of her eyes held a green cast now and her nearly full lips were creased into thin lines.

Johnny had to grin in spite of himself. "Good thing he isn't in your sights right now."

She looked at Johnny and he could feel the full force of the anger within her. Then the drive left her in a gusty sigh and she smiled back. "Good thing," she said, and there was a tinkle in the laugh that followed.

"I get so mad at his high-handedness at times I could spit nails. It wasn't more than two days ago his men cut our wire and ran a bunch of stock over our fields. Dad's had to do it all over again."

"He's going to fight Dupere?" asked Johnny.

"Aren't you?"

"What's been done before will happen again."

That heat was back within her. "Does that mean a man has to crawl? My father's tired of working for others. It got him nothing. This way he's at least free to fight."

Johnny's eyes went from the girl to his burned and ravaged store. Tiny crinkles fanned from the corners of his eyes.

"I didn't," he said, "put my winter and summer's pay into this place expecting to run away from it at the first sign of trouble. There can be a town here—a good one. Dupere can't stop that—nor me."

He raised his eyes at the sound of an oncoming wagon. Two men were in the driver's seat and four in the bed. The man holding the reins pulled the team up sharp and called out, "Martha, you all right?"

The men all jumped from the wagon.

Martha said, "Yes, dad. Dupere burned Johnny Single's store."

The men fanned out and looked at Johnny and looked at the burned frame work and scattered goods.

Frank Worth said, "Dupere's a hard man, Single. I saw the smoke and got some of the boys. Sorry we couldn't make it any faster."

"I'm obliged," acknowledged Johnny.

A dark, swarthy man said, "Dupere'll kill or break us all."

"Spanish," Frank Worth said of the man who had just spoken, "is for pulling stakes."

"Don't know but what I agree," said Ep Carter. "I got my kids to think of."

"And what will they think of you for running?" asked Martha.

"Girl, be still!" commanded her father sternly. "Each man has his own problem to solve by himself. Those who want will stick and those who want will go."

"For those who stick," said Tom McMan, "there'll come a fight. A showdown."

"If it comes—it comes," said Frank Worth heavily.

"That's all right for you to say," put in Jess Rondeen. "You know how to use a gun—an' this new feller, Single, too, by the looks of him. We've hunted some, Frank, but we ain't fightin' men."

The silence ran along for a moment as the men looked at Johnny and looked at the store.

Johnny said, "What's a fighting man? No one knows until the fight stars. I've seen the weakest of the lot show the most courage."

"I don't know—" said Spanish.

And silence settled on them again as each withdrew within himself with his thoughts.

And looking at them and at the girl, Johnny understood. There were those who could not take a backward step and those who rode the fence of life looking for the easy side upon which to walk. The cut of life's cloth was ever the same. Until a showdown presented itself these men would have their fears and their doubts—and unless faced with a choice they could not be banded together in a united front against the tyranny of a man like Curt Dupere. He was a strong man and he could put fear into them.

Johnny said, "I just opened this morning for business and I'm now declaring a fire sale. If there's anything you can find where you can scrape off the burn and use it—it's yours for free. Anything else you want to buy is half price."

The men moved in among the ravaged articles and made their picks. Martha selected several bolts of gingham that had been damaged and Johnny gave them to her, saying, "For wetting me down like a stalk of corn."

They laughed about that.

When the men were finished, Johnny had collected five dollars and eighteen cents. He looked at it in his palm and scratched his head ruefully. "I wonder," he mused, "if Ol' Sol in Las Cruces will extend me credit on that."

"You ain't gettin' out?" asked Spanish.

"I'm not getting out," said Johnny emphatically. "This is the hub of the valley. I've staked it and there'll be a town here one day. It'll be a good town and I'll own the biggest store in it. No, Spanish, I'm not getting out for Dupere or anyone else. You can tell the people, boys, that they can buy their staples at Johnny Single's Cross Roads Store."

They all looked at Johnny and looked at the store. There was some respect and more of doubt in their eyes. They turned and got back in the wagon and Frank Worth extended his hand to Johnny. "It's men like you, Single, that build a place," he said.

Johnny nodded his thanks, lips creased. "I'll stay as long as I can," he said.

Frank Worth got into the wagon and lifted the reins. "Coming, Martha?" he called.

"In a minute, dad," she answered.

Her father nodded and turned the wagon back across the creek.

Martha said, "You'll be going to Las Cruces immediately?"

"Have to," said Johnny. "Need more tar paper and supplies."

"Who'll watch the place?"

"I'll have to risk what's left."

"Dad hasn't much for me to do. I'll keep an eye out."

"I'd be obliged."

Martha turned and went to her horse. She swung up and lifted a hand to Johnny, then roweled across the creek.

For long moments Johnny Single looked after her. And when he could no longer see her because of the swell of the plain he felt a strange loneliness. It was a pointed feeling, a sort of hunger that was a part of the new life he had staked out here for himself. He was not exactly surprised. It wasn't the sort of life a man led alone.

Covering what goods he could with tarps, Johnny got the team hitched up and headed out to Las Cruces. There he had a hard time convincing Sol Cohen that his cross roads' store was a good risk, but he finally prevailed.

DIPPING down over the rise in the plain, Johnny Single saw a tent pitched across the hub from his store. He urged his team on to a faster walk. Then Martha Worth was riding out to meet him, wheeling her pony beside his wagon and looking in at the supplies.

"You did it."

Johnny nodded and indicated the tent with a cant of his head.

"Your town is started, Mr. Single," said Martha proudly. "Mike Strawn, horseshoer, has set up his forge across the street from you."

Her eyes had that shine in them again and Johnny felt warmth flood through him.

She was going on, "Nothing's happened to the store. I sold a few things and have the money in my pocket."

"Dupere?" he asked.

"Hasn't been this way," she answered. "He's been busy deviling the farmers over by the Broken Horse Hills. Last night that killer of his, Snake, rode through and warned everyone not to purchase anything at your store if you were still around. That warning won't stop all of them, but it'll be hard going for a while, Johnny."

Johnny shook his head in sober agreement. "He doesn't dare call for a showdown yet. He hasn't been forced to it. But when it gets right down to it, he'll fight, Martha."

She agreed with a thoughtful nod. "Those who're for you now know that."

They rode on in silence and turned into the store.

A big man came from the tent, followed by three youngsters. His shoulders were as broad as the back end of the wagon and his hands were the size of hams, gnarled and caloused. But he was a gentle man for all his bulk. That showed in the twinkle in his eyes and at the turned up lip corners. The three

children followed him like chicks follow a mother hen.

He reached up and took Johnny's hand. "The girl has been telling me," he said. "It's a town that should be here and I'm the shoer and livery man. These are my children, Brad, Dick and Gail. Their mother is gone, God rest her soul."

"Glad to have you, Mike Strawn," said Johnny. "Others will come."

"'Twill be a fine place to bring up my two boys and the girl. It's an Eden here."

Johnny climbed down from the wagon on the off side and muttered to himself, "With the snake and the apple all rolled into one."

In two days, Johnny Single had the walls and roof back on his store. He cleaned away the traces of the fire and got everything in order. Some of his customers came boldly in the daylight for their staples and others came stealthily at night. Johnny served them all and his prices were fair. He fed Strawn's kids, Brad, Dick and Gail, enough licorice whips to make them sick.

And as the days went by Strawn enlarged his tent into a lean-to and made his trips to shoe the nesters' horses. A man and his wife moved in beside Strawn. The man's lungs were ailing and he coughed a lot and was pale of face. But they were nice and the woman looked after Strawn's kids when he was away.

The Cross Roads had a population of seven residents—eight, counting Martha Worth. She was in the store most of the time, helping Johnny with odd chores. Shyly, they made small talk between them.

This day with the sun tree top high, a rider quit his mount in front of the store and clumped inside. He looked like all the others who came here. Straw hat, bandanna about his throat and tucked down into his overall bib.

"You know the Murphys, back the road a piece?" asked the man.

"Don't think I do," answered Johnny.

"They're on the South road about five miles out," he said. "Sod shanty. They're all sick and Miz Murphy asked me to leave you this order and would you bring it out." He put a piece of paper on the rough pine counter.

"Sure. Sure," said Johnny. "Be glad to."

The man said, "Thanks," and went out to his horse and rode off.

Johnny filled out the order and put it all in an empty soap box. He hitched up his team and called to where Mike Strawn dozed against the wall of his lean-to.

"Be back in a little," he said. "Look out for me."

Mike waved a hand in acknowledgement and went back to his dozing.

Johnny rode slack in the wagon seat, the

heat of the sun soaking into his hunched back. He let the horses pick their own way along the road and his thoughts were of Martha. It was getting so that hollow came into his stomach every time he looked at her—he was, for the first time in his life, a little frightened. He'd just have to up and ask her the question one of these days soon....

He saw the sod shanty and pulled onto the side road and went up to it. A large woman came from the shanty. She held a baby in her arms. Three grimy children followed her, clinging to her skirt.

"I brought your groceries, Mrs. Murphy," said Johnny. "Hope you're feeling better."

"Groceries?" shrilled the woman. "Feeling better? Young man, I feel fine. I don't want any groceries."

"But you sent a man to the store—" began Johnny.

"No such thing," corrected the woman. "I won't go near that place. Think we want trouble with Dupere? Now you get off our land—or I call my man. Bertram!"

But Johnny wasn't listening to her now. The sound of that man coming into the store was in his ears. That clumping. He had been wearing cowboy boots—high heels that made that heavy-footed sound.

Without a word, lips pulled back from his teeth, Johnny wheeled his team and sent them down the road at a dead run.

The woman held tightly to her baby and muttered, "Now I declare—"

Johnny laid the leather to his team. The wagon careened crazily around the turns and then he was rushing down on the Cross Roads. He pulled his team up sharp and stood in the wagonette, the rounds of his eyes hardening at what he saw.

The tar paper walls of the store were torn away. Goods were scattered and stomped beyond redemption. This time the job had been well done. Then he saw Mike Strawn there on the ground before his lean-to, his children clustered around his body and staring dumbly down at him. A woman was there, too, her hands on the children's shoulders. Her man, Jim Bricker, sat on the ground, holding his hands to his head.

Johnny rushed to Mike's side. Mike was dead, the bullet hole in his chest slowly ebbing blood. At sight of Johnny the woman and children began to cry loudly.

Johnny went to Jim, shouting, "What happened?"

The man continued to sit, holding to his head.

Johnny cuffed those hands aside and saw the welt made by a pistol barrel across Jim's nose. But it did not arrest the savagery welling in him. "What happened?" he demanded harshly.

The man coughed violently and there was more than physical pain behind his eyes. He muttered weakly, "Nothin' I could do. I ain't strong—"

"What happened?" Johnny cut him off.

"Dupere and his men," said Jim. "Mike tried to stop 'em and the little fella shot him and hit me. Dupere didn't like it much and raised—"

Johnny turned away and heard no more. For long moments he stood looking into space with unseeing eyes. Curt Dupere had started the ball rolling, whether he had given Snake his orders to shoot or not. He had tricked Johnny away, knowing the others were not fighting men. Johnny was not aware of Martha Worth riding up and leaping from her horse to grab him.

For Johnny was moving toward his store. He went inside and got his rifle and saw to its loads. It was then Martha's pleading voice broke into his humming ears.

"Where are you going?"

"To kill Curt Dupere."

"Johnny! Johnny, you can't! He's surrounded by killers. You'll never get there."

"I'll get there."

"Wait, Johnny! Talk to my father. Maybe we can—"

"No time for talk," said Johnny flatly. "It's late now."

Then he was pulling away from her and going to his wagon. He put the rifle on the seat and climbed up. He lifted the reins and sent the team on at a trot toward the north.

Martha called after him, but he did not turn his head. With a sob she ran to her horse.

JOHNNY SINGLE worked his wagon across the valley to the edge of the Broken Horse Hills. Then he turned up toward the northern end of the valley. Somewhere up there he would cut the trail that led into the Dupere Jinglebit ranch. There was no feeling in him, just a numbness from the violence with which this new life of his had ended before it had rightly begun. And he knew his life was still cut from the old cloth. A man could never lay his guns down forever, he guessed. Curt Dupere fancied himself a law unto himself. Johnny, too, had known his own laws.

Then he cut the broad trail that led up toward the Jinglebit. He quit the wagon and went ahead on foot, keeping to the brush. He worked his way up a ridge and looked down on the country below. There, in a canyon pocket, stood the ranch house.

Johnny scouted the yard for long moments, his rifle thrust ahead of him. There were three men there on the bunkhouse bench. Snake was one of them. Curt Dupere came

onto the porch from the house and sat down in a chair. Johnny worked the lever of his gun and jacked in a shell. He drew a bead on Dupere but did not pull the trigger. It was Curt who fought from rimrock and drygulch. Each man to his rules. Johnny had to go down there.

Cautiously, he worked his way around and made the back of the corrals that were behind the bunkhouse. He slid along the bunkhouse wall to the edge of the yard. Somewhere in the main house a door banged loudly, sending its sheer clap across the yard. Then Johnny Single stepped into the open and called out, "Dupere!"

The big man lunged from his chair with surprising agility and ducked down. Johnny threw a shot, but missed. The bullet chipped wood from the porch stanchion at Curt's head.

A pistol spoke to his left and Johnny jacked in a fresh shell and threw a shot in that direction. Snake and the other two punchers scurried around the corner of the bunkhouse. Johnny went to one knee and leveled on Dupere again. Someone inside the ranch house was yelling.

Curt cowered behind the porch stanchion and his pistol spoke. Dust kicked at Johnny's feet.

He hit Curt with his next shot, for he saw the big man slew around. But it wasn't square. It did not take Dupere off his feet. Then something hit Johnny hard and he was falling forward. There were wild yells in his ears. His last conscious thought was that he had failed and that Curt Dupere still ruled the roost. Blood was warm and salty in his mouth. . . .

When he opened his eyes, Martha Worth was applying cool cloths to his head. There was a horrible ache behind his eyes and his tongue felt swollen and furry. But he managed a question.

"Easy—" Martha said.

Then the others were crowding around him. Frank Worth, Spanish, Jess Rondeen, Ep Carter and others.

"I guess you touched us off," Frank Worth said. "When Martha came riding in and told us what you were going to do, I guess we kinda figured we needed the store and store-keeper in these parts. You shouldn't have tried it alone, son."

"Dupere?" Johnny's voice was hoarse.

"Dead," said Frank. "Some of his crew, too. Snake for one. The rest are scattered. You were right about what makes a fighting man. We still don't know. You just fight when you have to."

"Go away," ordered Martha. "That's enough for him to know now." She looked down at Johnny and smiled and there was that wonderful warmth in her eyes.

DEATH IS MY HOMESTEAD

Custer City hadn't changed since Jim Lannegan rode away—the same gents still needed killing—and refused to die by any other hand!

JIM LANNEGAN pulled his horse to a stop by the big stone watering trough in the town square. A grin stretched his wide mouth as he studied the lay of the town.

Custer City had not changed in the seven years he'd been away. A new saloon down the street, a fresh paint job on Hackaday's Dry Goods and Grocery Store, a few new faces eyeing him idly from the shady side of the street—that was all.

His fingers fondled the money belt tied around his waist—three thousand in hard earned money—earned behind a marshal's badge in Ellsworth and Abilene. Enough money to buy Jeb Moody's little spread on Turkey Creek. Moody had answered his letter and had agreed to sell. Jim Lannegan had wanted that little cow outfit from the day he'd first seen it. When he'd pulled out seven years ago, a slick-eared kid without a dime in his pockets, he'd promised himself he'd come back some day and buy it.

He pulled his roan's head up from the moss green water and headed for the livery stable. He was anxious to make his way around the town. It being Saturday, he might even run into Jeb Moody here in town and they could close the deal.

He was almost to the livery when a gaunt, leathery-faced oldster hollered his name and came legging it across the dusty street. The oldster pulled up panting and reached out a gnarled hand to clasp Lannegan's. Jim stared down into the milky blue eyes, recognition coming to him slowly. Then he grinned.

"Howdy, Walt," he said. He studied the other, taking in the shoddy, rundown shoes and patched overalls. Walt Reed had been a fairly prosperous farmer when Lannegan had pulled out of Custer City to put his guns on the block. He said, "You're lookin' good, Walt."

Walt Reed dropped Jim's hand and shook his head. "No, I ain't. I'm near broke and plumb wore out. It's like I told you in that

letter. Lafe Snyder's been doin' all the lookin' good hereabout'."

Jim Lannegan's grin froze. He looked at the old man blankly. He'd never received a letter from Walt Reed—but then, he'd been on the move lately.

The oldster went on. "Soon as you left, Lafe Snyder started trying to freeze me off my place. Turned his cows loose in my fields, cut my fences, blew up my well and even scared off my hired hands. He didn't get so bad until that killer brother of his, Harvey, got back from the pen. When he got back they set out to freeze all us farmers off the range." He stopped, then added hesitantly, "I ain't askin' you to stick yore neck out for us. There's plenty others in my fix too. I kept puttin' off writin' you about our trouble, thinkin' we might work it out ourselves. But you said when you left that if we ever needed help against Lafe Snyder just to holler."

An embarrassed hard look crept into Lannegan's eyes as the oldster talked. He'd forgotten about the trouble he'd left here when he rode away. Seven years is a long time in a man's memory. All he could remember was Jeb Moody's place with the big river willow shading the creek bank right behind the cabin. He'd forgotten the flare-up between Lafe Snyder and himself—one he'd settled by bending a gun barrel over Lafe's ugly head. He'd thought it'd give Lafe some sense.

He'd even forgotten his promise to old Walt. He'd been a gun-slick kid in those days, with a flare for showing off.

Lannegan wanted to tell old Walt to put out his own fires. He wanted to tell the old man that he was figuring on spending most of his time under the big willow tree on Jeb Moody's place, fishing for channel cat and that he didn't give a solitary damn about other people's troubles.

But old Walt was looking up at him straight and there was hope in his sun-squinted eyes and a little used smile stretching his

There had still been no shooting in the street when he buckled on the belt. . . .



By
**DAN
KIRBY**

weather-cracked lips. And Lannegan heard himself saying, "I'll check into it, Walt, soon as I get the feel of things here I'll have a talk with Lafe."

The oldster grinned. "I knowed we could count on yuh, Jim. You take yore time, Jim. Have your talk with Lafe. 'Pears to me you're the only gent on our side that talks his language."

The oldster moved back toward the board walk and there was spring in his legs and a square set to his shoulders now, Jim noted.

Lannegan stabled and fed his horse, then moved out into the street. He mulled over briefly his talk with Walt Reed. He'd talk to Lafe Snyder. That he would do when the opportunity afforded. But if talking did no good he was checking it back to Walt. He hadn't promised to pitch in and fight the farmers' battle for them. Besides, there wouldn't be much he could do about it single-handed. He wasn't a gunslick maverick any more and Lafe and Harvey would have riders

siding them. Live and let live was a damn good rule for a man trying to get along in cow country.

A WOMAN came out of the dry goods store with an armload of bundles. Lannegan glanced at her idly and would have shifted his eyes except for the look on the woman's face. She was staring at him wide-eyed, color mounting into her cheeks.

"Jim Lannegan," she said huskily, "I heard you were coming back."

Recognition came to Lannegan with the sound of her voice and he felt his face burning hotly. He tipped his hat self-consciously. "Howdy, Laura," he said uneasily. He felt embarrassed for himself and for her too.

She said, "You didn't recognize me, Jim. Seven years ago you left town because I married George Welch instead of you, and now you didn't even know me." She laughed teasingly, but Jim caught the bitterness in the sound.

He said, "Sure I recognized you, Laura. You're looking good. You usta' be a little on the fleshy side." He recalled to memory the laughing, alluringly curved girl of seven years ago and compared her to the thin, pinched-faced woman before him. He twisted his hat in his hands.

"How's George?" he asked.

The woman's smile faded. "Fair, Jim. Just fair. George was doing a good business at the seed and feed store, but it's played out lately. The farmers have no cash to buy and we can't give them credit. Lafe and Harvey Snyder told George they would take it unkindly if we grub-staked the farmers through the trouble." She paused and hope lighted up her eyes. "It'll be different, with you back."

Jim shook his head. "I didn't come back to fight Lafe, Laura. That's over an' done with, a kid's quarrel. I came back to buy Jeb Moody's place. A man's got to settle down some time."

The woman's face sobered. "That'll go hard with George. He was counting on you when he heard Walt Reed had written to you about the trouble. I—I wonder if you'd have a talk with George, Jim? He needs to talk to somebody like you. He's changed some of late. Things have been hard."

A harrassed look shadowed Lannegan's leather brown face. It was beginning to seem as if the whole town had been nursing its troubles and waiting for the day when he came back to unload them on his shoulders. But it couldn't hurt anything to have a talk with George Welch.

A lopsided grin twisted his lips. "Sure," he said, "sure, Laura. Don't you worry none. I'll have a little talk with George."

The woman smiled her thanks and turned toward the sun-blistered, shabby frame house at the end of the street. A small, barefoot, chubby-cheeked boy toddled out of the store and followed at her heels. Her kid, Lannegan guessed. He stuck his hands in his pockets and whistled tunelessly. He tried to think about Jeb Moody's place, but some of the eagerness had burned out of him. An uncertain, half angry feeling welled up inside him. He wondered why it was that people would remember and believe the braggart promises of a show-off, gun-hand kid. He himself had forgotten them. He felt the sudden need of a drink and turned toward the Lady Luck saloon across the street.

He eased inside the batwings and froze there. Walt Reed's age-thin voice filled his ears. "Snyder," old Walt was saying, "you're through pushing us farmers around. Jim Lannegan's back."

Lafe Snyder was nursing a beer, his paunchy stomach pressing against the bar. He was a big, hairy-armed man, snake-eyed and mean

tempered. He laughed contemptuously. "So you hollered for help, eh, old man? Well, Lannegan won't give you any." He set down his glass and turned around to face the oldest. "I owe Lannegan something. Might be I oughta' give it to you." His fist swung up in a short, savage blow. It cracked against the old man's jaw and he went down hard. Lafe grinned viciously and sent a booted foot crashing into the oldster's side. "I've owed this to Lannegan since the day we had that run-in."

Lannegan's irritation at the way in which things he'd forgotten were ganging up on him here turned to cold, killing anger. He was across the room before Snyder's second, carefully aimed kick found its mark. He grabbed the cowman's thick arm and spun him around.

"If you owe me something, Lafe, you can give it to me."

The cowman's hard, fleshy face turned red. He stared at Lannegan. Then anger stormed into his face and he swung.

It was a hard blow but wild. Lannegan caught it on an elbow. He moved in close and chopped a fist into the man's puffy lips. He pushed Snyder back and put a hundred and eighty pounds of rawhide muscle behind a straight right that caught the big rancher square in the belly.

Lafe Snyder whimpered and folded up. He settled on the floor, gasping for breath that would not come. Lannegan grabbed him by the shirt collar and dragged him out onto the boardwalk.

"Lafe," he said, "things haven't changed much. I can still whip you."

Lafe couldn't find breath to answer but there was hell shining out of his small eyes.

Lannegan turned back into the saloon. Old Walt Reed was on his feet, wiping his bruised face with a damp cloth that the bartender had handed him. He looked at Lannegan. "Thanks a heap, Jim. That big devil woulda stomped me to death."

Lannegan felt resentment against the old man. "Walt," he said coldly, "I don't take kindly to you sticking my neck out like you did. Just because I said I'd talk to Snyder about yore troubles don't give you call to broadcast that I'm siding you sodbusters all the way. I'm checking out."

A hurt look crept into the oldster's eyes. "All right, Jim. Reckon I did shoot off my mouth too much. It was just that I ain't had a chance to talk back to that sidewinder since you left. You do as you want. It ain't rightly yore fight—and we can't pay you nothin'." He stuck his hat on his head and moved toward the door.

Now that the excitement was over, men resumed their places at the tables or wandered out into the street. Lannegan moved up to the bar and ordered a whiskey. A girl made

her way from the back of the room and stood beside him. She was young and blonde, and the paint on her face was not overdone. She smiled at Lannegan.

"I saw you working Lafe Snyder over," she said easily, a faint brittleness in her voice. "You did it up neat."

Lannegan grinned. "I'm gettin' back to old habits. Lafe and me never got along."

She looked at him with frank appraisal. "So you're Jim Lannegan, the little tin god. I've heard a lot about you. Mostly from the farmers that come in here." She lowered her eyes to the money belt around his waist. "They told me you wore two guns."

Lannegan frowned at his whiskey. "Was a time when I did. I shucked them. A man finds it hard to live peaceful with hardware on each hip."

The girl looked at him questioningly. "It's been told around here that you were coming back to help the farmers."

Lannegan scowled. "I had nothin' to do with the tellin' of it. I came back to buy Jeb Moody's place. I wrote him about it."

The girl smiled. "Yes, a man should settle down—some time."

There was an edge to the girl's voice that needed Lannegan's temper. He set down his glass and spun a dollar on the bar.

"Buy yourself a drink," he said shortly and walked out.

HE STOOD out on the boardwalk and surveyed the single, deep-rutted street. The farmers' wagons were standing desolately in a vacant, sunbaked lot, the teams dozing in their harness. The farmers themselves were mostly gathered in the town square, sitting in groups under the shade of the big elms. Waiting for some gun-angel to come along and fight their battle for them, Lannegan thought bitterly. He felt tired and a gnawing in his stomach reminded him that he had not eaten since early morning. He turned and headed for the restaurant down the street.

He ate beef and potatoes and washed it down with strong coffee, but the food in his stomach did not relieve the sudden weariness that had gripped him. He thought about saddling up and riding out to Jeb Moody's place, but it came to him that he was not sure he wanted to stay in this town. The realization came as a shock and he rolled a smoke, turning the thing over in his mind. When a man has set his head in one direction for seven years a change of course leaves him drifting.

Looking across the street he saw Laura Welch leaving her husband's feed store. He'd promised to talk with George. He angled across the street and went inside the barn-

like building with its smell of oats and hay and musty litter.

George Welch was leaning back in a chair behind the seed bin. He looked at Lannegan standing in the doorway and a mocking grin twisted his lips.

"Laura told me you were back," he said. "What did you come back for, Lannegan? To help the farmers or show Laura what a poor choice she'd made? Maybe you can still get her, Lannegan. Maybe you've figured that."

Lannegan read the anger and resentment smouldering in the man's dull eyes. He saw the half full whiskey bottle on the floor by the chair and an empty one in an equally empty feed bin.

"I've seen men beaten before, George," he said. "I been whipped a few times myself, but I ain't never seen a real man whipped sitting down. I came over because I promised Laura I'd talk with you. I figured I might even make you a loan of a little money. But you don't need money. You need guts."

George Welch grinned drunkenly. He uncorked the whiskey bottle and took a long pull. "You talk like Laura, Lannegan. She's always throwin' it up to me that I ain't a fighter like you. Maybe I ain't. She knew it when she married me. Maybe she's tired of her bargain. Why don't you ask her, Lannegan?"

Anger and disgust shook Lannegan. He stepped forward quickly and slapped Welch hard across the face, knocking him from the chair.

"You're drunk, George," he said hoarsely. "You fill yourself full of cheap whiskey because you can't stand yourself when you're sober. I'm not after Laura. There wasn't much between us before she married you, though I thought it would kill me at the time. But if she and that boy were mine I wouldn't be sittin' here waiting for the wolves to close in. I'd get me a gun and go huntin'." He wheeled around and stalked outside.

He headed toward the livery stable where he'd stabled his roan. He was sick of Custer City and the people in it. Trying to settle down on Jeb Moody's place would be like trying to find a cool spot in Purgatory. He knew that now. Folks here had tagged him for their troubleshooter. They looked at him and saw a man whose name stood for gun-smoke and killing.

He was nearing the livery when two men stepped from the shadows of the building. They stood facing him, blocking his path into the barn. One of them was Lafe Snyder. The other was a lean, dark shadow of a man, somber-eyed and with a six-gun riding low on each thigh. This was Harvey, Lafe's gun-slissing brother, Lannegan guessed.

Lafe edged behind Harvey a little, his eyes burning with the hate that filled him. "Plug

him, Harvey," Lafe urged viciously. "Plug the dirty son."

A contemptuous half smile crooked Harvey's mouth. "He ain't gonna hurt yuh, Lafe. Not any more." His eyes stared at Lannegan. "It's bein' told around you come back to side the sodbusters. They say you're all hell with a six-gun, but I say you're yellow." He paused and eyed Lannegan's gun-bare waist. "A man's yellow that shucks his gun to dodge the trouble that's due him."

Lannegan said, "There was a time when I'd have killed you for them words, Snyder. But if I did I'd be fighting a battle that rightly belongs to others. I ain't that big a fool. Not any more."

The gunman's lips tightened. "Then get outa town, Lannegan. As long as you're here you're sand in the craw of them nesters. They figure you're behind them."

LANNEGAN nodded and moved into the darkness of the stable. He found his saddle and threw it on the roan, then slipped on the bridle and rode out into the street. Harvey Snyder had said to get out of Custer City, and to Lannegan that sounded like good advice.

He could feel the eyes of the Snyders and their crew on him as he rode down the street. It wasn't that he was running from a fight, he told himself. Even Harvey Snyder, himself, egotist as all gunhawks are, would not honestly think that Lannegan was being run out of town. He was simply avoiding trouble—and a little surprised to find that the situation galled him.

Sheer perversity of temper made him pull up at the saloon. He dismounted leisurely and walked inside.

The saloon was empty except for the blonde girl, who was picking out a strange tune on the dilapidated piano, and a couple of gray-beard oldsters playing two-handed poker at a corner table. He moved up to the bar.

The girl left the piano and moved up beside him, the same cultivated half smile teasing her lips. "I see you're still alive," she said. A hint of concern edged into her voice. "Harvey Snyder was telling it in here that he intended to kill you or run you out of town."

Lannegan's face flushed. He scowled into his glass. He said, "I'm saving him the trouble. Don't know why I ever came back. I've got nothin' here. No reason to stay."

She looked at him quietly. "Every man should settle some place. You said so yourself. This is your home town. You mentioned a place you wanted. That brought you back, you said."

Lannegan's lips twisted. He made wet rings on the bar with the beer glass. "Jeb

Moody's place? Yeah, with the big river willow shading the creek. A fine place. A fine tree—to hang a man from."

The girl shrugged. "Your leaving will hurt the farmers. They've been countin' on you. Even old Walt Reed didn't really believe you'd go back on them, though you told him today you were through."

Lannegan drained his glass. "Can you figure it?" he grunted moodily. "Seven years ago it was that I told them sodbusters if they ever needed help against Snyder to let me know. I told another person that too, a woman. Until today I hadn't seen or heard of them since. But they remembered. They remembered and they were waiting for me when I rode in. Lined up an' waiting for something for nothing."

The girl said quietly, "Why not?" They've heard about you from the day you left, seven years ago. You gave them no chance to forget. You built a reputation with your guns and every man you killed left you owing them something. A man who fights has a debt he's got to pay. I don't blame them for wanting to collect."

Lannegan set down his glass hard. "To hell with it, I say. A man owes himself something, sister."

He was just starting for the door when the batwings burst open. Laura Welch darted inside, her eyes dark with fear.

"Jim," she cried. "Jim, for God's sake stop George. He'll be killed!"

A chill swept Lannegan's spine. "What are you talkin' about, Laura? What're you doin' in a place like this?"

Laura's white face pleaded with him. "It's George. That talk you had with him, Jim. He said you were right. That the wolves were closing in and it was time to do some hunting. I didn't know what he meant until he strapped on a pistol. He's going after Lafe and Harvey Snyder, Jim. Gunning for them alone." Her voice was thick with terror. "Jim, he'll be killed. You know that."

The chill drained from Lannegan's spine and settled in his stomach. A cold, dull lump that pulled at his inside. His eyes fell from Laura and settled on the saloon girl. She was looking at him quietly, unsmilingly.

He moved toward the door and peered over it. Across the street Lafe and Harvey Snyder still sat with their half dozen gunhands. There was a tension in them. Harvey looked at the saloon and caught sight of Lannegan. The little gunman jerked a thumb toward Lannegan's roan.

Two blocks down the street and moving toward Snyder's gang was George Welch. The man was walking stiffly erect, no falter or drunken stumble in his strides. He moved with the air of a man dead set on doing a job.

From behind Lannegan the saloon girl said, "You talked him into this. You told him what the great Lannegan would do and he's going to try to do it."

Laura moaned softly. "He'll be killed."

Bitterness swept Lannegan. He'd done what Laura asked. He'd talked to George. Talked too strong, perhaps. But he'd been angry and fed up. He hadn't much cared what he said. And drunken, weak-spined George had become a man. The bitterness in Lannegan drained out into hollow futility. George would be killed sure. No single man could face the odds packed in the guns of the Snyder gang, and walk off after the battle.

The blonde-haired girl moved behind him. She said flatly, "Your horse is outside. What's keeping you?"

Lannegan whirled on her, his face bleak as gray granite. "Get my guns," he said. "They're in the saddle bag. That's what you want, isn't it? That's what the whole dam' town's been waitin' for. Get my guns! Snyder's gang won't shoot a woman."

The girl brushed past Lannegan, white-faced. She went through the batwings. She came back with the heavy, twin belts slung over both arms. "Good luck to you, Lannegan," she said.

LANNEGAN'S eyes were raw with emotion. A lopsided grin came to his lips as he took the guns. He jerked the money belt from around his waist and threw it to the girl. "I won't need it where I'm goin', sister. Buy yourself another drink."

He buckled the gunbelts around his waist and tied the holsters on his thighs. There had still been no shooting on the street. Lannegan flashed a quick glance at Laura. She was crying softly, her eyes staring at the blank wall before her. He eased the guns in their holsters and walked outside.

Harvey Snyder saw him first. He swore hoarsely. Then his hands streaked for the low slung guns at his thighs.

Lannegan moved with the cold, sure swiftness of a man doing a familiar and dangerous job. He drew, leveled and fired his right hand gun in one continuous movement. Harvey Snyder's half drawn guns settled back into their holsters as he fell. Lafe Snyder's fleshy face was white with fear and hate. "Get him, men!" he roared. "Get the dirty son!"

Lannegan fired two fast shots at the big rancher, but Lafe had moved behind the protecting trunk of a huge elm that grew by the walk. Lafe's riders were getting into action now. A bullet whined past Lannegan's ear and droned off into space. Another slashed into his leg and he went to one knee, drawing his other gun as he fell.

Dimly Lannegan was aware that George

Welch was in the fight. He could hear George shouting, cursing Lafe Snyder, daring him to step out and fight. Lannegan made a stumbling run for the meager protection of a watering trough in front of the saloon. But he didn't quite make it.

A bullet crashed into his side and he dropped, falling hard, momentarily losing the grip on his six-gun. Lafe Snyder edged out from behind the tree. His gun was leveled square at Lannegan and he pulled the trigger, a vicious mad dog look on his ugly face. Lannegan heard more than he felt the bullet that ripped into him. His mind was floating. He found strength to grasp his gun, but he could not lift it.

Gun thunder rose to a wild crescendo, but it was like the rumble of distant thunder in Lannegan's ears. He wondered vaguely how George was making out. He tried to lift the gun again. Sweat popped out on his forehead and trickled down his face. Or was it blood? He didn't know. His gun arm was like a thing detached and the gun seemed rooted in the ground. A great weariness settled over him and he ceased to struggle.

He rested fitfully. Once he awoke and a strange man was hovering over him. A man dressed all in white. Then the vision passed and he slept again, but his sleep was full of noises and people's voices. He could hear George talking at times, and sometimes there would be the voices of women. Laura's voice for one, and another voice, a soothing voice that stilled the roaring in his brain. Then the voices would fade and he would sleep deeply. It was a good feeling to just sleep.

He awoke tired and listless, as if the last ounce of energy had been drawn from him. He looked about him and saw that he was in a small room. There were pictures on the walls. One of them was a picture of George and Laura—a baby in Laura's arms.

The gun fight came back to him then, and a cold thought struck him. George must have been killed. No man could have stood up under the withering fire of Lafe Snyder and his gunmen. Not even the great Lannegan. It was the saloon girl who had called him that, with quiet sarcasm in her voice.

The door opened and Laura stepped inside. She smiled at him. "How do you feel, Jim?"

He shook his head. "What about George? It's him you should be thinking about."

Laura put a hand on his head. "Fever down some," she said. "George is fine. He got nicked once, but it healed over in a couple of days. Walt Reed saved him and you, too. Walt and the rest of the farmers cleaned up Lafe Snyder, Jim. They were just waiting for you to show them the way. They needed somebody to start the fight, I guess."

(Continued on page 130)

BAD TOWN

"I know you've gone bad, amigo—I'm wearing your lead to prove it. Wearing it till I find out for sure you ain't still the better man!"



By
**WALLACE
UMPHREY**

A gun sounded as Matt was falling forward. . . .

THE sound of gunfire drifting in through the hotel window put a frown between Matt Kelso's graying eyebrows. He sat there listening, the old familiar tension running through his heavy body. His eyes turned to the vest, with the star pinned to it, draped over the back of a chair.

He shook his head. Billy Westlake would be having his hands full and more to boot. Billy would not make a very good substitute sheriff. Things seemed to have got a little out of hand.

Old Doc Hughes said testily, "All right now, Matt. All right now! Shuck outa that shirt and let's see what's what."

Unbuttoning his shirt to reveal the thick

pad of bandages underneath, Matt still listened to the sounds outside, his head cocked a little forward. More guns sounded. Hoofs drummed in the dusty street. It sounded as if Tylertown was being hurrawed like it hadn't been hurrawed for a long time.

"Lazy T boys," said Doc Hughes, gently unwrapping the pad of bandages to take a look at Matt's chest. "Trail herd up from Texas. Camped across the river. Boys feelin' their oats after the long trek. Don't blame 'em none. Billy ain't doin' so good."

Matt Kelso winced under the old medico's probing fingers. He asked, "How's it look, Doc?"

"Lucky you ain't dead. An inch to the right

and you'd be lyin' with your toes waving at the angels. A couple of more days and you can pin that tin star on your chest again."

"How are folks taking it?"

"It ain't my business, Matt, to bend an ear to idle chatter. There's always talk. You got friends and you got enemies. I never seen a lawman otherwise. Only you got more friends than enemies. Billy Westlake ain't the man to cope with real trouble. There's some talk about bringin' in a new sheriff. I wouldn't pay no mind to it."

Matt Kelso said, "Explain yourself."

Doc Hughes shrugged. "Bucky Rand out-drawed you and damn near finished you off—"

"I knew his maw real well," reflected Matt, troubled.

The old medico looked up quickly. "What you gonna do about him, Matt?"

"I don't know," Matt said carefully. "Nothing, I guess."

Doc Hughes looked away. "Some folks think it was the beginning of the end, Matt. Bucky has been braggin' about it ever since—how he outdrawed the great Matt Kelso. He's got a right sizable crowd down to the Palace believin' him. Some folks figger your sand's about run out. You ain't gettin' no younger, Matt."

The drumming of hoofs grew fainter. Matt Kelso touched his grizzled hair, let his hard palm run down across his lined and weathered face. He wasn't getting any younger. He had been the law of Tylertown for a long time now. It had been a good law. A man could fight anything except age.

"Who the folks got in mind?" asked Matt gently.

Scowling, Doc Hughes packed his black bag. "Dandy Boyd. Hell of a note, Matt. Take it easy for a couple of more days. See you later." He pushed his fat body out through the door and down the stairs.

Matt Kelso sat there wrapped in thought. Life was a long dark trail down which a man walked blindly. No man was gifted with prescience. All trails must end. But somehow Matt had never thought his own trail would end like this.

He took his lip between his teeth. Dandy Boyd was not the man for Tylertown. This was Matt Kelso's town. The town had a personality of its own, and sometimes Matt thought of it as being a composite of the son and daughter he had never had himself. Here were good and bad, weakness and strength. It was the way it should be. Being sheriff was more than just another job to him. It was his life. The years had taught him how the town should be run—a steel fist covered by a soft glove.

Dandy Boyd was a sort of legend. He was very fast with a gun, a man who gave no

quarter. His gun was always for hire. His fist was steel and he had no padded gloves to soften the punches. His guns were lethal, and there were some who said that the blood lust was in him and that he killed for the sheer joy of killing.

Matt Kelso slowly shook his head. Dandy Boyd wasn't the man for the job. He'd break the spirit of Tylertown with his flaming guns instead of taming it. There was a vast difference. When he was through there would be nothing left.

A new sound came from the street, and Matt walked to the open window and looked out. Two men boiled out of the feed store down the block. Hank Miller, owner of the store, picked up the other by the seat of the pants and the scruff of the neck and hurled him into the street.

Bucky Rand picked himself up slowly from the dust and said something to Hank Miller and then slouched away.

Indecision was a shadow in Matt Kelso's eyes. *I don't know what to do about Bucky,* he thought. *I just don't know. . . .*

TWO days later he donned his star and walked down to his office in the small stone jail. His bullet wound didn't bother him very much.

Billy Westlake was genuinely glad to see him. Billy Westlake was a small thin colorless man about Matt's age. He didn't lack in physical courage, but he just didn't have the knack for handling proddy cowhands. Nevertheless, he was a good deputy. He was a fine hand for paper work, allowing Matt the necessary freedom to keep a practiced eye on the town. Billy Westlake chewed tobacco incessantly.

"Sure glad to see you, Matt," he said around the huge quid in his mouth. "Town's going to hell in a basket. I never really appreciated you before."

Matt Kelso walked back and looked into the cells. There were four of them. Three were empty. In the fourth a man was sleeping, stretched out limply and breathing in drunken snores. Matt went back to his desk and sat down. He pulled out a drawer and looked at the gun lying there.

"Lazy T hand," Billy Westlake was explaining. "Name of Tug Newland. Started shooting up the Palace this morning. Tossed him in a cell to cool off."

Matt nodded. He looked at his gun and then changed his mind and closed the drawer again. "Anything I should know?" he asked.

Billy Westlake averted his eyes. He cleared his throat. He looked at Matt, blinked, leaned over to remove the quid of tobacco from his mouth, then looked away.

"Out with it, Billy."

"It ain't good, Matt. The Citizen's Committee—they are a bunch of old women. They voted to get Dandy Boyd up here."

"When's he due?"

"Today," Billy Westlake told him. "Dammed old grannies!"

Matt Kelso sat quietly. The hurt didn't show on his seamed face. But it was there, just below the surface. They had fired him and hired a new sheriff without even consulting him. They had simply by-passed him completely. Matt thought he knew why, but that didn't help much.

"Seems like they might have told me about it," he said suddenly.

"That's what I mean," said Billy Westlake. "It's the way the committee handled the deal."

Matt got up and stood in the doorway, his broad back hunched. He wished somebody would come and tell him that he was fired, but he guessed they'd wait until Dandy Boyd rode into town. Probably they were all ashamed of the way they were acting.

The town was drowsy under the hot sun. Half a dozen horses stood hipshot at the hitch-rack in front of the Palace. John Garson, the proprietor of the Mercantile, a tall, thin, severe man, came out to the board walk and looked up and down the street. *Looking for Dandy Boyd*, Matt thought.

The citizens' committee. John Garson; Rink Leslie, who owned the Palace; Hank Miller, proprietor of the feed store; banker Charlie Armitage. John Garson was chairman. They were all honest, upright men. All of them had spent most of their lives in frontier towns, but none of them seemed to understand much about people. Justice and freedom were not things that could be easily pigeon-holed.

"What about Bucky Rand?" asked Billy Westlake.

Matt turned to regard his deputy. He guessed everybody was asking that same thing. He gave what was becoming his stock answer. "I don't know."

A wild yell sounded, far off. Matt Kelso jerked his head around. Hoofs drummed against the earth. There was another yell. A gun popped at the hot sun.

"Lazy T hands," Billy Westlake said uneasily. "Reckon there's only one reason. They are after their buddy we got in jail. I'm kinda glad you're back, Matt, to handle things."

Matt Kelso stepped out into the street and shaded his eyes, looking off toward the river. He saw a tight group of half a dozen riders spurring across the bridge into town. Matt stepped back onto the high board walk to wait for them.

This wasn't new to him. This was something he had handled so many times before. The devil got into youngsters sometimes.

These men weren't mean or really dangerous. They had ridden a hard trail, and worked hard along the way, and at trail's end they took time out to play. They played rough but they were seldom mean about it.

Now they reined in close, but Matt Kelso didn't budge. He stood there watching them, his face relaxed and even friendly. The leader was a tall, lanky redhead, who sat his big black easily, a gun in his hand.

"What's on your mind, Tex?" asked Matt.

"You damn well know!" The big Texan leaned far down. "We want Tug Newland."

Matt shook his head regretfully.

"We mean to have him, sheriff!"

"I'm sorry, gents," Matt said. "But your buddy stays locked up until he's sober. That's the way we do things here."

A shout answered him. Anger was here, all around him. But it was undisciplined anger, and not too dangerous. Anger funneled into a narrow channel was the dangerous kind.

The Texan spurred closer. "We're takin' Tug Newland with us, one way or the other. Make up your mind. If it's a fight you want—we'll give it to you."

"We'll blow that little old damn jail of yours to hell!" somebody else yelled.

"There won't be a fight," Matt said quietly, and he moved very fast. Easily, with an assurance born of long experience, he reached up and pulled the Texan out of the saddle.

The redhead hit the dust and bounced. Matt twisted the gun out of the lean hand.

Then he stepped back and said, "You boys are forgetting something. You know the reputation of this town. I aim to keep things peaceful here."

"To hell with you!"

Matt shook his head, his voice still calm. But there was a hard seriousness underlining it now.

"You boys are always welcome here," he said. "You can have all the fun you want—within reason. But when you come here, you leave your guns behind. You can have your fun without wild shooting. Fun is fun—but when a man dies it isn't funny any longer."

Matt took a step backward. He was sensitive to people. He felt the tension begin to ebb. The lanky Texan climbed to his feet, and Matt handed him his gun. Suddenly the redhead grinned. It was more of a wry grimace, but still a grin.

"You heard him, gents," he called to his companions. He mounted his horse and then looked down at Matt. "You're a white man, sheriff. We won't give you no more trouble." He lifted a hand. "Let's mosey, gents."

Matt watched them ride peaceably away. Good-naturedly he called out, "Have yourself a time, Tex." The lank Texan waved back at him.

When Matt turned to enter the jail again, he saw a man sitting a dusty roan, watching him. The man neither nodded nor spoke. He regarded Matt for a moment, then rode on. Matt knew it was Dandy Boyd.

He wondered if Dandy Boyd had seen the whole thing, and then guessed that he had. And he wondered how Boyd would have handled it,

"That was a nice thing you done," said Billy Westlake, lowering a shotgun. "I had you covered all the time."

Matt Kelso smiled at him, then walked back to stare at the prisoner in the cell. Tug Newland was still snoring.

"He'll be hungry when he wakes up, Billy," said Matt. "See that he eats." Matt Kelso walked to the door. Without turning he asked suddenly, "Billy, do you reckon Bucky Rand is all bad the way folks are saying?"

There was no answer. Frowning, Matt turned his head. Billy Westlake looked away from him, down to the floor. Matt sighed. That was all the answer he needed to know how Billy Westlake felt.

MATT paused in front of the Palace bar. The dusty roan that had carried Dandy Boyd into town was at the hitch-rack. Matt looked across the street at John Garson's Mercantile, but he could see nothing through the dusty windows.

"Kelso!"

Matt turned to see Bucky Rand coming toward him. Bucky Rand was stepping high, weaving a little. Matt felt the strange doubt again assail his mind. He still hadn't made up his mind what he was going to have to do about Bucky.

He's got the look of his maw, Matt thought briefly. Bucky Rand was thin and dark, not more than twenty. He was wearing twin six-guns slung low on his thighs with the holsters tied down. His thin face was flushed and there was a bruise high on his cheekbone. Matt thought, *That's where Hank hit him the other day.*

"My aim was off some last time," Bucky Rand sneered, halting a few feet in front of Matt. He let his hands brush the polished grips of his guns. Matt noticed that his eyes had a mean cast to them. "Next time you won't be so lucky."

"Will there be a next time?" asked Matt.

His mind went over it again—how it had been. Bucky Rand had been causing trouble in the Palace and Matt had gone in to arrest him. Even when Bucky drew a gun, Matt hadn't really thought there would be shooting. He had thought Bucky was only showing off. And that moment of indecision had given Bucky Rand the advantage. Matt Kelso had been dropped with a bullet in his chest.

"I'll be damned," said Bucky Rand. "Kelso, you ain't even wearing a gun!" A jeering grin came into his eyes. "Gettin' yella, Kelso? Afraid to pack iron any more?"

Matt Kelso remembered his gun back in the drawer of his desk. His eyes were calm. He saw John Garson watching from across the street. Bucky Rand half pulled one of his guns.

"Put it away, Bucky," Matt said. "You've had enough trouble without looking for more."

Their eyes locked. It was Bucky Rand who finally dropped his gaze. With forced bravado he jammed the gun back into its holster. Still sneering openly, he swaggered on down the street.

Troubled, Matt Kelso pushed through the batwings of the Palace and let his eye run quickly along the men at the bar. Dandy Boyd wasn't among them. Well, he was probably over talking to John Garson and getting some of the range dust out of his hair. Rink Leslie came out of his office at the back, hesitated a moment, then came up.

"Let's have a drink," he said.

They had their drink in silence. Then Matt Kelso said slowly, "I saw Dandy Boyd riding in."

Rink Leslie wiped his lips. He was a big, solid man wearing somber dress. He didn't look directly at Matt.

"All this wasn't my idea," he said. "I don't feel so good about it. I was against importing a man like Dandy Boyd. But the rest of them voted me down. You're worth a dozen Dandy Boyds Matt."

"Thanks, Rink."

"I tried to tell 'em," the saloon owner went on. "They didn't listen. Dandy Boyd will put a wall around the town, and pretty soon the trail herds won't come here any more. John Garson worries about his windows being shot out, and he can't see no farther. What does he think will happen to business if the trail herds go elsewhere?"

Matt Kelso nodded. He had the feeling that Dandy Boyd's guns would sound the death knell of the town. Men like Dandy Boyd had no understanding of people, because they didn't care. Such men know only the power of the six-gun.

"I feel kind of low-down Matt," Rink Leslie said. "I guess all of us on the citizens' committee, except maybe John Garson, feel kind of ashamed about how we acted. The rest of them, they voted to bring Dandy Boyd to Tylertown. But nobody had the guts to come tell you about it."

Matt Kelso asked, "Has there been any more trouble with Bucky Rand?"

The saloon owner frowned. "There will be. He swore to kill Hank Miller two days ago, because Hank threw him out of the feed

store. Matt, don't let the memory of Bucky's maw confuse you."

"Keep talking," Matt murmured.

"He's mean, Matt. You know it. His paw died in a gun fight over rustled stock. It kilt his maw. Bucky takes after his old man. He's bad, Matt, clean through."

"I don't know," Matt Kelso murmured, lifting his shoulders and letting them fall again. "I just don't know."

Rink Leslie went away, and Matt stood there. He couldn't think of Bucky Rand dispassionately. The memory of Bucky's mother kept intruding into his thoughts. Matt Kelso had loved her, but she had married Bucky's father. There was a wild streak running through Bucky, but after all he was little more than a button, and he might grow out of it. A man should have the chance to prove himself.

The batwing doors folded open and two men came inside, side by side. They walked along the bar.

"Matt," said John Garson heavily. "Meet up with Dandy Boyd."

Matt Kelso accepted the extended hand. Dandy Boyd was smiling faintly. He had a smooth-shaven boyish face, curly hair, white even teeth. Ivory-handed guns swung at his hips. He dressed like a dude. He looked very young—until you saw his eyes. They were like green ice, with neither compassion nor understanding.

There was a star pinned to his fancy vest.

"Boyd is taking over the sheriff job," said John Garson bluntly. "I'm sorry, Matt, but you'll have to hand over your own badge."

"You should have told me when you first got the idea," Matt said.

John Garson flushed. "We wanted to be sure he was coming before telling you."

"Kind of coppering your bets, huh?"

The flush on John Garson's face deepened. "I don't like that, Matt. The citizens' committee talked it over. This town needs tough law enforcement. Why, just last week I lost another window! Such goin's on must stop. You've always been too easy-going."

Matt shrugged. "Where would this town be, if the trail herds stopped coming? What's the price of a broken window then? I aim to see this town keep growing."

"We jest don't see things alike," John Garson said stiffly. "Dandy Boyd is taking over right now."

Matt Kelso flexed his lips. His eyes remained calm, but bitter anger was a tumult inside him. His lips flattened out and his jaw jutted with stubbornness.

"It's not that easy," he said quietly. "I can't be fired on such short notice. Come next pay-day, I'll turn over the office to Boyd."

"But that's two weeks!"

"All right."

"I'd think you'd want to cooperate, Matt."

Matt Kelso let his hand rise, then fall.

"Two weeks."

Dandy Boyd put back his head and laughed. "Two sheriffs in this town at one time! Now ain't that something!"

There was a shout from outside, a wild yell. Matt pushed to the street with both Dandy Boyd and John Garson at his heels. The wild yell came again.

Shading his eyes, Matt looked up the street toward the jail.

Tug Newland was weaving toward them, yelling wildly. In one hand he waved a six-gun. He loosed a shot into the hot sky.

Matt Kelso tried to guess how it had happened. Billy Westlake had taken the prisoner something to eat. He had been overpowered and locked into the cell. The prisoner had grabbed Matt's gun from the desk drawer.

"Yippee!" cried Tug Newland. "I'm a curly wolf!"

The street cleared. John Garson ran inside the Palace. Matt Kelso and Dandy Boyd stood side by side—the two lawmen of Tylertown. Tug Newland staggered closer, laughing delightedly.

"There ain't a jail big enough to hold me!" he yelled. "I'm just a no-account cowpoke on the prod!"

Matt called out quietly, "Give me that gun. Tug. Let's talk it over."

Tug Newland hesitated, a little bewildered, a sort of sanity coming into his eyes. He advanced more slowly. Matt said, "I'm buying the drinks, Tug. How does that sound?"

"Yippee," said Tug Newland. His heart was no longer in it.

A shot sounded and Tug Newland spun in a tight half-circle and fell down slowly. He tried to lift the gun in his hand but it was too heavy.

Dandy Boyd had drawn and fired. The draw had been fast and smooth and effortless, and smoke still dribbled from his gun. There was a sooty look in his green eyes.

"I could have talked him out of it," Matt Kelso said.

"Why bother?" asked Dandy Boyd, grinning crookedly. "He had a gun and he was drunk and I've got a star. That's enough."

"It's not enough," said Matt, a little helplessly. "Tug was a little wild, maybe, but not mean."

John Garson came out of the Palace and said, "Boyd's right, Matt. Tug Newland is an object lesson. We'll have peace just as soon as all the rest of them realize what they're up against."

Matt Kelso's shoulders dropped. "Peace John? You have peace in a graveyard, too."

NIGHT fell swiftly. A purple haze showed over the distant peaks, turned to jet and it was dark. A breeze came up with some coolness in it.

Matt Kelso kept out of Dandy Boyd's path. He wondered if he were being foolish, hanging on to his shield under the circumstances. But maybe a man had a right to be foolish once in a while, particularly if it was because of a principle he knew in his heart



With a cry of fear he emptied his gun at the place where Matt had fallen. . . .

was right. And Matt still hadn't made up his mind about Bucky Rand. Somehow, that seemed like unfinished business—something he himself should take care of.

Billy Westlake came in from dinner. He was still berating himself for his stupidity in allowing Tug Newland the chance to escape.

"Forget it," said Matt Kelso.

"I can forget it," said Billy Westlake, "about as easy as I can forget a boil where I sit down. You gonna eat?"

Matt nodded. He strapped his gunbelt around his thick waist. John Garson had brought him the gun, which had been removed from Tug Newland's dead hand. Matt loaded it and shoved it into the worn holster. He didn't like carrying a gun particularly. A gun planted the seed of death. Matt had found that you could almost always talk a man out of a fight. But he didn't want Dandy Boyd laughing at him.

He crossed the street to Rosie's Eats, his head bowed against the weight of his thoughts. The town was starting to come awake for the evening's pleasure. Several horses and

buckboards were tied in front of the Palace now. Noise streamed out of the Savoy Dance Hall farther down the street.

Matt took a chair beside Doc Hughes at the counter and ordered his dinner. Doc Hughes was sitting there, drinking a cup of coffee and smoking a black cigar.

"I saw Dandy Boyd in action," Doc Hughes commented.

Matt lifted a shoulder, let it fall.

"Well, to hell with 'em," Doc Hughes said firmly. "I'm an old man and I can sit by and laugh at 'em after the ghosts take over the town."

Matt Kelso said in a troubled voice, "Tell me, Doc. Is Bucky Rand all bad?"

Doc Hughes took his cigar out of his mouth and looked at it for a long time. The ash was gray and firm, and he flicked the cigar and watched the ashes disintegrate into nothing.

"You're asking me to sit in the judgment seat, Matt," he said slowly. "It's a seat that don't fit me none too well. He's got bad blood, Matt. I think it's too late to hope for anything."

Matt sighed. "I guess maybe I've been wrong."

"Not wrong," Doc Hughes told him. "Just careful."

The sound of shooting came from outside. Matt lifted his head quickly, then shrugged. Dandy Boyd was out there. Dandy Boyd could handle it. There was another shot but Matt steadfastly ignored it. His own way and Dandy Boyd's way were different, and Matt thought his own way the best. But that was a matter of opinion. And besides, it no longer mattered anyway.

John Garson hurried into Rosie's Eats. The kerosene light put deep shadows in his cavernous cheeks. He was breathing rapidly, like a man who had been running with something heavy on his mind.

"Matt—" He touched Matt Kelso's arm. "It's Bucky Rand, Matt. He shot Hank Miller in the Palace. He threw down on everybody and ordered them outside. He and Hank Miller are still inside. Bucky has the door barricaded."

Doc Hughes automatically reached for his black bag. He asked, "Hank dead?"

John Garson shook his head. "Bucky only wounded him. Bucky's holding him as hostage. He'll give us Hank alive in return for his freedom to get out of town."

"No," Matt Kelso said.

"You can't say that," said John Garson, his voice lifting. "Hank Miller has always been my friend. He can't die."

Matt Kelso asked, "What does Dandy Boyd say?"

"He says no, too." The tip of John Gar-

son's tongue wet his thin lips. "Bucky Rand won't deal with nobody but you, Matt. He knows he can trust your word."

"No," Matt repeated.

"What you aimin' to do?" asked Doc Hughes.

"I know what I have to do," Matt told him. "Maybe I should have done it sooner."

They went out and down the street to the Palace. Men milled on the sidewalk out in front. Dandy Boyd had taken over, and he was giving the orders. Matt touched his shoulder.

"We're gonna bust down the door," snapped Dandy Boyd. "We'll surround the place and get a log and bust in the door. Bucky Rand can't get away with this."

Matt heard John Garson suck in his breath. "That's signing Hank Miller's death warrant!"

Dandy Boyd let his lip curl. "You claimed the shootin' of Tug Newland was an object lesson. Here's another. Bucky Rand won't make a trade in a town I sheriff. I'll get him, no matter who else is gonna get hurt along the way."

Matt shook his head. Dandy Boyd frowned, and Matt said, "It's not my way, and my way is the best."

There was a pool of silence while the crowd looked at him. His voice carried authority—the authority to which they were all accustomed.

Matt gave his voice a lift.

"I'll get him," he said. "All of you stand back. I'll try alone. It's the only way I can save Hank Miller."

They knew what he meant, and the danger. Matt Kelso would be walking as close to his grave as a man could walk. The odds were wrong, the deck stacked against him. Bucky Rand was desperate and he had everything his way. He could cut down Matt Kelso before Matt even got close to him. Bucky Rand would be captured eventually and he knew it, and so he would kill and kill again before he himself died. It was in his blood. Bad blood.

But if he didn't get Matt, it was the only chance to save Hank Miller. Bucky wouldn't hurt Miller further until he'd made sure of Matt.

From the fringe of the crowd Doc Hughes called out, "You, Dandy Boyd! Maybe you'd like them odds."

Dandy Boyd put back his head and laughed. "I'm not a fool, Doc. That's why I'm alive today. I'll face any man and shoot it out with him fair and equare. But I'll be damned if I'll walk straight into a trap!"

His head bowed, Matt Kelso knew that was how it was. His own mind and Dandy Boyd's marched along different paths. People meant

nothing to Dandy Boyd. His trust lay in his speed with a flaming gun. But there were times such as this, when speed alone didn't count for much, and Dandy Boyd didn't want any part of it. To Dandy Boyd death was a means to an end. And Matt Kelso didn't believe that the end always justified the means.

He lifted his head and said, "Give me five minutes. If I'm wrong you can plant me later."

There was a brief murmur of encouragement as he slipped around the corner toward the back of the Palace. He knew that his chance of success was slim, but it was a chance he had to take. And he was counting some on Bucky Rand's bad blood. Courage is more than a loaded gun and the lust to use it.

He paused beside a window. There was no light inside. Somewhere in the darkness Bucky Rand was crouched, waiting, the twisted channel of his mind closed to everything but escape. Matt didn't even try to guess where Bucky Rand was crouched. He tried to close his mind against too much thinking, because thinking would get him nowhere now. His actions had to be ruled by instinct.

With the butt of his gun he smashed the pane of glass. Shards of glass clattered on the floor inside. Feet rustled there in the heavy darkness. A hoarse, dry cough sounded.

That would be Hank Miller coughing. Feet rustled again. And that would be Bucky Rand moving to meet the new threat.

With a sort of prescience Bucky Rand whispered thickly, "Matt! Matt Kelso!"

Matt didn't answer, because words were now useless things. It was too late for words now. For a moment he tried to guess how Bucky Rand's mind was working, but he gave it up. No man can really read the mind of another. Matt dove head first through the broken window, depending upon speed and surprise to get him in the clear. He hit the floor inside, rolled away from the window. A shot racketed and he could see the powder flash, but he was in no position to fire in return.

He felt something warm wetting the palm of his hand, and he knew that he had been cut by a piece of glass. Silently he gathered his feet under him and stood up. He stood there, letting his eyes become accustomed to the darkness. He tried to visualize the interior of the Palace, but the darkness made it difficult. It's strange, he thought, *how lost you are in the dark.*

Muted sounds came from the crowd outside in the street, but the sounds seemed a long way off. They seemed to come from a world removed. Matt felt alone in time and space, just himself and Bucky Rand and no one else. The waiting ate away at the tips of his nerves, and his only consolation was the knowledge that Bucky Rand was affected the same way.

"You'll never take me, Matt," Bucky Rand whispered.

Matt Kelso didn't fire at the voice. He knew that Bucky Rand would have been moving all the time. It was a game of waiting now. A tell-tale powder flash might be the end.

Chances were that Bucky Rand was hiding somewhere behind the bar. It was the best protection offered by the Palace. Carefully Matt edged along the wall, avoiding the tables and chairs that might be in his path.

A sudden small noise came from across the big room. Matt's hand jerked involuntarily, but he held his fire. It was a trick to get him to reveal himself. Bucky Rand had tossed something, trying to attract his fire.

The silence went on and on until it seemed to raise a clamor inside Matt Kelso's head. It was nerve against nerve. It depended now upon who broke first.

Darkness was a wall against his eyes. Matt Kelso slid silently forward along the wall in the direction of the bar. And then his luck deserted him. His toe caught in a chair leg and the chair crashed to the floor.

A gun sounded as Matt was falling forward to the floor. He felt the numbing shock of the bullet along the side of his head. He couldn't help a grunt of pain. He rolled over over, trying to get into the clear.

Then Bucky Rand broke. With a cry of fear he emptied his gun at the place where Matt Kelso had fallen.

Matt fought against nausea, against the cloak of darkness that was being drawn across his conscious mind. He propped his arm on one elbow and fired carefully, aiming at a

point just above the flashes which were blossoming from Bucky Rand's gun. He heard Bucky Rand sag to the floor. And then the cloak of darkness inside him enveloped him completely, and he didn't hear the front doors being battered down. . . .

"PLAIN too tough to kill," he heard Doc Hughes saying, as if from a long way off.

Matt Kelso fought off the cloak of darkness around his mind. Willing hands helped him sit up. The lamps had been lighted now. He saw Bucky Rand stretched out on the floor. He saw Doc Hughes move over to Hank Miller's side and go to work. Matt let his eyes drift back to Bucky Rand. *Bad blood*, he thought. He hated death, but this time, maybe, it was for the best. He tried not to think of Bucky Rand's mother, whom he had once loved.

He looked up into John Garson's face.

"A man hates to admit he's made a mistake," John Garson said. "But I'm admitting it. You were right, Matt, and I was wrong. Tonight I started thinking in terms of people instead of in terms of busted windows."

"What about Dandy Boyd?" asked Matt.

John Garson smiled solemnly. "He rode out of town a few minutes ago. It was his own idea. Nobody had to suggest it to him. I guess this town was more than he could handle."

Matt Kelso's smile was as solemn as that of John Garson. This, Matt knew, was his town. It had a personality of its own. A stranger just didn't have the understanding.



THE CITY OF WONDER



By E. Charles Vivian

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TALES of the

NO 15

by LEE

COLORADO'S DIAMOND BONANZA

LATE IN 1871 TWO WEATHER-BEATEN PROSPECTORS ENTERED THE OFFICE OF GEORGE ROBERTS, SAN FRANCISCO MINING PROMOTER, AND ASKED TO LEAVE A SACK IN HIS SAFE OVER NIGHT. SLYLY QUESTIONED BY THE CURIOUS ROBERTS THEY RELUCTANTLY ADMITTED IT CONTAINED NOT GOLD BUT DIAMONDS.

CAUTIOUS INQUIRY REVEALED THE MEN TO BE PHILIP ARNOLD AND HIS PARTNER JOHN SLACK, EXPERIENCED MINERS, BUT DID NOT REVEAL ARNOLD'S RECENT PURCHASE OF \$12,000 WORTH OF UNCUT CULLS IN LONDON.

ROBERTS HASTENED TO BANKER WILLIAM RALSTON WITH THE NEWS OF THE AMAZING DIAMOND STRIKE. SURREPTITIOUSLY HE AND THE CANNY RALSTON REMOVED THE STONES TO LOCAL JEWELERS WHO APPRAISED THEM AT \$100,000.

NEXT DAY THEY "PERSUADED" THE PARTNERS TO LET THEM FINANCE DEVELOPMENT OF THE FIELD, THEIR AGENT TO INVESTIGATE IT OF COURSE.

ARNOLD AND SLACK LED THE AGENT, BLINDFOLD, BY ROUNDABOUT TRAILS INTO COLORADO. THE BANDAGE REMOVED, HE FOUND HIMSELF IN A SANDY GULCH BESIDE A MESA. DIGGING INTO A GLISTENING ANTHILL WITH HIS KNIFE HE UNEARTHED A DIAMOND. SOON THEY COLLECTED NEARLY 100.

THAT CONVINCED RALSTON. HE PAID THE PARTNERS A \$100,000 DEPOSIT AND HURRIED THEM TO NEW YORK TO ORGANIZE A SYNDICATE.

OLD WEST

WHEN A WELL-KNOWN JEWELER THERE PRONOUNCED THE STONES GENUINE, PROMINENT BANKERS CLAMORED TO PARTICIPATE PROVIDED THEY COULD LOOK THE CLAIM OVER WITH A MINING EXPERT, AND CONTRACTED TO BUY OUT THE PROSPECTORS FOR \$650,000, SLACK SETTLING FOR \$100,000 CASH IN ADVANCE.

THE PARTNERS RETURNED WEST--AFTER SECURING ANOTHER \$50,000 WORTH OF IMPERFECT STONES--MET THE SYNDICATE AND ITS EXPERT AND CONDUCTED THEM TO THE GULCH WHERE THEY DUG OUT DIAMONDS BY THE HANDFUL.

THE DELIGHTED FINANCIERS PAID ARNOLD THE \$450,000 DUE. SHORTLY AFTERWARD A GOVERNMENT GEOLOGIST EXPOSED THE "SALTED" DIAMOND FIELD.

SLACK HAD VANISHED, BUT ARNOLD WAS LOCATED IN HIS NATIVE KENTUCKY, WHERE ATTEMPTS TO EXTRADITE HIM PROVED DIFFICULT. HE FINALLY SETTLED FOR \$150,000, TURNED BANKER AND IN '73 WAS SHOT BY AN IRATE COMPETITOR.

*"One of us has no
guts, sheriff — and I
don't leave town till I
prove the color of
yours!"*

*In a split-second flash Rig-
don got the picture. . . .*



TINSTAR — BUSTER —

JOE RIGDON was saying, "I want to ask about that sign in your window—" when a yell in the street outside interrupted him and jerked his attention to the open door. He was in time to see the end of a fight.

Two men seemed to have been arguing on the warped plank walk a few feet away. Abruptly one of them turned, as if to move away. The other had already begun a move toward a lowhung holster; the bright, nicked barrel cleared leather, came up in a smear of reflected sunlight. It made a slashing, side-wise blow and a battered straw hat went tumbling. The stricken man groaned, his

shabby, denim-clad figure breaking at waist and knee. He took another swipe from the wicked gunbarrel, going down; and when he hit the sidewalk in a heavy sprawl his opponent finished the job with a solid, vicious boot toe to the ribs. The downed man's body yielded to the kick, then lay motionless.



It all happened so quickly that Rigdon, in the print shop doorway, couldn't have intervened had he wanted to, but the involuntary exclamation that broke from his startled lips was loud enough, apparently, for the man with the gun to hear. The latter twisted sharply, and for a moment narrow, ugly eyes bored challengingly into Rigdon's.

The man's face was heavy and brutish, but now for the first time Rigdon caught the glint of sun from a bit of metal pinned to the thick chest—a marshal's badge. Silence had clamped down on the sunsmitten town. The man who had called the first warning stood motionless across the way, watching. And behind Joe Rigdon, a voice spoke crisply. "Well?"

He turned, dazed and a little sickened, and met the cold eyes of the man seated at a paper-littered desk behind the railing. "You saw my sign in the window?" The gaunt, stoop-shouldered man seemed utterly unperturbed by the thing that had just transpired outside his door. "You're a good, first class printer?"

Rigdon hesitated.

The other man said, "The last tramp printer I had working for me left without any notice, and me with an issue due off the press day after tomorrow. I'm getting fed up with the fiddlefooted breed—next one I hire, I'll want assurance he isn't going to be walking off the job without any provocation, just because he feels the urge to wander."

"I think I could give you that assurance," Rigdon said quietly.

"Yes?" Vince Frazer, the editor, favored him with a long, dubious look, that took in Rigdon's hard-muscled, spare shape, the sun-darkened features, the worn brush jacket and levis and scuffed Justin boots. "Looks to me you've spent more time in the saddle, than with composing stick in your hand, but—" he shrugged, picked up a paper from the desk—"here. This editorial has to be set up before we can put the sheet to bed. Get to work!"

Rigdon took the paper, scanned the opening lines.

COURAGE AND LAW ENFORCEMENT

After a regrettable period of laxness on the part of its elected officials, this town of Red Butte may at last congratulate itself on having chosen a law guardian who fills every requirement and need of his office. The *Herald* takes pride in its part in bringing this to pass. For in the six weeks that our successful candidate, William York, has served in capacity of marshal he has well proved himself a reliable, efficient, and utterly fearless public servant—

Joe Rigdon's head jerked up, and he shot an unbelieving glance at Frazer. "If that was

your precious Mr. York I just saw putting on that exhibition of courage, yonder on the street, then I'd say you got more courage than he to endorse him. Why, he jumped that other man from behind—an' with a gun at that."

Frazer stared at him icily. "Plainly, you wouldn't get along very well on the *Herald*. No point of your hanging around any longer."

"I'll add something to that," a new voice put in, savagely.

Joe Rigdon hadn't noticed the big shape of the man plugging up the doorway behind him. He whirled, tilted his head to look full into the narrow, vicious eyes of the town marshal. The naked gun still dragged down York's huge fist, and contemptuous rage was in the dark, brutish features.

"You got a big, loud mouth for a tramp typesetter!" York gritted. "I've killed for less loose talk than I just listened to, but I'm givin' you a break—I'm tellin' you to fog dust out of this town inside the hour. Do that and maybe I'll let you go with a whole hide. Otherwise—" His expression altered suddenly, turned narrowly speculative. "You know, mister—some reason or other I got a feeling I've run afoul of you before, some place."

"I don't reckon so," Joe Rigdon told him evenly. "I'd know a face as ugly as yours, was I to see it a second time." And with that he turned his back, shoved past the scowling marshal and into the quiet, sunsmitten street. But at once he felt the bunching of the muscles along his spine, at thought of that naked gun behind him, and he wondered where he had found the nerve to talk so rashly.

HIS sorrel bronc was in the stable, getting a feed of oats and a rubdown to take some of the trailstain off its weary hide. Joe Rigdon knew an impulse to head directly for there, saddle up and ride out of this dangerous, gun-bluffed town. There was nothing to hold him here—nothing but a smattering of pride.

After the big talk he'd made, it would be unseemly to beat too hasty an exit and so he moved directly across the lazy street and up the two broad steps to the saloon.

The unconscious form of the man York had whipped was gone now from the sidewalk. Coming into the shadowy, sour smelling bar, Rigdon saw that the hurt man had been brought here and that a doctor was working on him, binding his scalp where the front sight of the marshal's striking gun had lacerated it.

Rigdon ordered his drink and stood leaning at the bar, forcing himself to take it slowly while he watched that scene. The in-

jured man was seated in a chair at one of the green-covered card tables, slumped a little groggily there while the sawbones worked on him. His name, Rigdon heard, was Neeley. There were a number of other men around him, with the varied look of farmers, small stockmen, merchants—all sharing an angry indignation. One he recognized as the man who had called warning to Neeley. He heard this man addressed as Tim Garber—a small string rancher by his appearance.

Garber was telling the rest the details of the encounter. "I figured York was going to shoot him down—but he just used his gun barrel an' boots. That shows how damn little he or his boss are scared of us."

"They're right, at that," another muttered sourly. "They know none of us has enough gun savvy to stand up against them. It's Frazer's town—and as long as he owns the town he and his V-F Connected iron can run the range, too."

"Sure looks like we're whipped. Have been, since the day Frazer rigged the town council to appoint his man to the marshal's office!"

Joe Rigdon swore—maybe he was still a little inflated by the heady brew of his own strong words to Frazer and York; maybe it was the whiskey. Maybe his not having got the job rankled, too. He slapped his empty glass down on the bar with a noise that made all those around the table glance at him sharply.

"You say somethin', mister?" Tim Garber asked.

Rigdon shrugged, checking himself. "I reckon not. It's none of my business—but, hell, seems to me there's more of you than of Frazer's bunch, ain't there?"

"You were right the first time," answered Garber, pointedly. "It's none of your business."

His remark had brought him the attention of all of them, including the hurt man, Walt Neeley. The latter said, frowning, "Wasn't you in the *Herald* office, just before York braced me and started that argument about water rights?"

"Yeah, how about it?" echoed Tim Garber. "You're a stranger in town—what would take you, right off, to Frazer's office?"

"I went in to ask about that printer's job that's open. But I sort of didn't like the looks of things. What you should have is another paper in town. Two papers keep each other honest."

Rigdon turned back to the bar, fishing in his pocket for a coin to pay for his drink. Tim Garber's voice stopped him.

"We did have another paper in town, mister. Maybe you noticed the *Journal* building, boarded up—it's just around the corner from here. Old John Holbrook ran the *Journal*

and did right well—till Frazer and York put him out of business."

"Is that a fact?" Joe Rigdon's tone was indifferent, but his face held a dark scowl as he clinked money on the bar and, without further comment, stepped to the batwings and out upon the warped sidewalk plankings.

He stood there for some moments, thinking over what he had heard.

Across the street the big Bill York stood in the print shop doorway; sun glinted from the marshal's badge on his thick chest, and he and Rigdon stood like that for a moment staring at each other. Rigdon thought the killer was going to move against him, but at last York spat and faded back into the doorway. Probably he meant to give Rigdon the full hour he had specified.

Joe Rigdon stepped down from the saloon entrance and began to make his way slowly along the walk, in the direction of the stable. Day was dragging out, late afternoon shadows darkening on this shaded side of the street. And despite the warning, that hung over his head, he knew very well now—after that talk in the saloon—that he was not leaving town.

Half a block down the first side street a small, one-story building stood empty and alone in the center of a double lot, where weeds were beginning to take possession. The place had stood deserted for some time, apparently. Dust was thick on the windowpanes and on the sign, slightly askew, that read, RED BUTTE JOURNAL. As near as he could tell through the streaked windows, the press and office furnishings stood intact. A for sale notice hung on the locked door.

A voice said, "Interested, mister?"

He turned quickly. A brownhaired girl in gingham, her arms loaded with sacked groceries, had stopped and was watching him in his inspection of the locked building. She was nice to look at and Joe Rigdon found himself coloring a little as he reached for his hat brim.

"I was kind of curious." He added, "Where would I find John Holbrook?"

Her face turned less friendly, more carefully scrutinizing. At last she said, "My father. Why?"

"Would you take me to see your father? I'd admire to talk to him—about newspaper business."

She hesitated again, then nodded. "Come along."

THE Holbrooks lived in a neat little frame house near the edge of town, with a carefully tended flower bed and hollyhocks nodding beside the fence. Joe Rigdon carried the groceries for the girl, and they talked a little as they walked through

the quiet streets. Her name was Nancy, he learned. He could guess that they were very poor—the house looked well-kept, but not because a lot of money had been lavished on it.

Sunset colors washed the sky, crimsoning the red cinder cone that lifted behind the little town and gave it its name. Holbrook, a spare figure in clean but threadworn white shirt and overalls, was at work in his garden when the two appeared. As Rigdon took the blue-veined hand, he could see in Holbrook's faded eyes the discontent of an active man forced to idleness.

"You want to buy the paper?" said old John, after Nancy's introduction. "I'll make you a good proposition—frankly, we need the money pretty badly—oh, Nancy!" he added, as the girl started for the house. "Put on an extra plate for supper."

"I was going to, dad." She smiled at Joe. Obviously, her worry had lifted.

Rigdon tried to lodge a protest, but she had already disappeared inside the kitchen and her father was saying, "Let's go around and sit on the front porch. I always like this time of evening."

All at once Joe Rigdon was wishing he hadn't come here.

Not that he didn't like these people—he did. He liked them much too well to enjoy the thought of dragging them into the thing he had envisioned in a moment's grim inspiration. And now the old man's pathetic happiness over the prospect of selling his white elephant added nothing to Joe Rigdon's comfort—he didn't know how he was going to tell Holbrook that this was all a misunderstanding, that he had no intention to buy.

Holbrook's joy seemed not unmixed with regret, however, as he led his guest up the steps to a couple of easy chairs on the veranda, and gratefully settled into one of them, with his feet hitched up on the rail. Joe could not miss the touch of sadness in his voice while he said:

"It's a good little paper, Mr. Rigdon. Five complete fonts of type, a press that's all oiled and ready to run—just as good as the day it put out its last issue. There's even half a dozen bales of stock in the storeroom. All you need is to knock off the dust, and you're ready to roll."

Joe Rigdon hesitated; then he was saying impulsively, "Mr. Holbrook, had you ever thought of starting up the *Journal* again yourself?"

There was silence, as Holbrook scowled at the sun-gilded tree heads and groped in a pocket for pipe and tobacco. They could hear the evening songs of the sparrows, the quick steps of Nancy working in the kitchen. Old John shook his head then.

"No!" he answered, sharply. "I know when I'm licked."

Joe Rigdon persisted. "I've heard plenty of feeling against Frazer today—talk made by the merchants and small valley ranchers, like Neeley and Garber and the others. I was thinking, if they could be brought together, organized—"

The old man shook his head again, wearily. "It'll never be done. Not by me or anyone. And understand—if you do buy the *Journal*, I'll expect you to pack up the type and press and cart them away to some other town. You see—it isn't a paper I'm offering for sale. It's only the building, and the equipment. The *Journal* died six months ago—and a newspaper is just like a man. When it dies, it can't be brought to life again!"

Rigdon knew then that his impulse had been a mistake. It was not in this town or its people to throw off the shackles of fear with which Vince Frazer and his gunmen had bound them. Then he was a little surprised at his own stubbornness. It was a job worth doing—and for personal reasons he was determined it should be done even if he had to tackle it singlehanded.

He got to his feet suddenly. On a quick resolve he said, "You've got a buyer, Mr. Holbrook. I'll give you five hundred in cash, and a note for the balance. And I want to include the lot and building."

"That's right," he added, half smiling at the incredulous stare the old man turned on him. "I want the whole works. Because, dead or not, I'm buying a newspaper. Maybe with it I can help bring the soul of this town to life again—"

AFTER a quick supper with the Holbrooks, during which little was said by anyone, he let the old man take him to the *Journal* office for a look at his purchase.

The light of a kerosene lamp showed him the dust of six months lying over desk, chairs, and the banks of type and the small mechanical press. The old man said, a little wistfully, "If you'll give us a day, Nancy and I can get the place cleaned up. Don't like to turn it over to you looking like a pigsty."

"That's all right," Rigdon said quickly. He was looking at the press, frowning a little. "Uh—I ain't just familiar with this type of press. How does it operate?"

Holbrook shot him a quick look. "Why, just like all the others. I'll show you—" He gave a quick demonstration in the manner of starting and stopping the mechanism, and feeding the paper into it. Afterward he added, "Anything more I can do for you this evening?"

Rigdon hesitated for just a moment, then firmly shook his head. "No, you've done enough for now—good evening, sir. And tell your girl for me that that was a mighty nice rhubarb pie we ate at supper."

Alone, he stood in the center of the little shop and stared around him, as though uncertain of his next step. He took a handful of the tiny slugs of lead type, ran them through his fingers thoughtfully and dropped them back into the case. Then he went to the desk and, swiping away some of the dust, settled into the swivel chair. In the pigeon-holes he found paper, ink, envelope, and a couple of unused stamps.

He wrote a letter, first of all, addressed an envelope and licked a stamp for it. Then he took another sheet and after a moment's consideration began to print in pen and ink.

GUN-LAW FOR RED BUTTE?
READ THE EDITORIAL
IN THE JOURNAL
OUT TOMORROW MORNING
AND THEN—
DO SOMETHING ABOUT IT!

When the handbill was finished he considered it with approval. After that he got his hat, blew out the lamp and locked the door after him as he stepped out into the quiet evening.

Rigdon's boots echoed through the shadows as he walked the half block to Main Street. The post office on the corner was closed, but he dropped his letter into the slot in the door. Then he went on to the saloon.

"Mind if I stick this up here?" he asked the bartender, indicating a bulletin board behind the mahogany. Lamps were on in the big room now, a handful of early customers in the place, among whom Rigdon recognized some who had been there that afternoon with Garber and Neeley. Curious eyes watched as he fastened the crude handbill on the board, shoving the tacks home with a hard thrust of thumb. Men were already moving over for a look as Rigdon turned and, without a word, strode out of the room.

It was the best advertising he could have found, he was thinking as he swung along the street toward the livery barn. Word would be all over town before many minutes had passed—and Vince Frazer would, of course, be among the first to hear of it. The gauge was down now.

Coming back from the livery stable, he had a belt and six-gun strapped around his flat waist and carried the carbine from his saddle scabbard. Loaded down like that, he ran face to face with Tim Garber in the light splash laid across the sidewalk by an uncurtained window. The rancher stared, tried twice before he could get words out.

"Did you post that sign in the Silver Bar, hombre?"

"Yes I did," Rigdon answered quietly. "Has Bill York torn it down yet?"

Garber didn't answer that. He only shook his head in disapproval. "You must be sure set on digging your grave." His glance flickered across the gunbutt at Rigdon's thigh, the rifle barrel glinting lamplight in his hand.

"No," said Rigdon. "I'm just going into business. I'm setting up that paper we talked about this afternoon. Be sure and read the special issue tomorrow morning."

He went on, leaving the man to stare after him. He went directly to the *Journal* office, stacked his carbine against the desk and lighted the kerosene lamp.

His first move was to make an inspection tour of the premises, checking on the locks of doors and windows. There was a rear door, leading from the little storeroom at the back, but it had a strong padlock and the timbers looked stout enough. He wasn't so sure of the window there, which would make it harder to guard his back. He went around pulling all the shades, shutting away the night and any eyes that might be watching him.

THE night grew older. Lights went out here and there through the town, but in certain buildings, the lights never darkened. A tension seemed to hang like smoke in the humid, summer darkness.

Through the hours, the lamp in the *Journal* office burned behind drawn curtains. Then, along about two in the morning, the sound of the old press began breaking at last a six-months' silence. It ran out across the darkness, sounding through the thin walls of the shop, making its rhythmic clatter unceasingly in the midst of the night.

Joe Rigdon was standing beside the clanking press, watching it with eyes drugged by sleeplessness, when he heard the timid knock at the front door. It brought him up with a start, one hand reaching for the carbine leaning beside him. But then something about the sound sent him across the warped boards and he threw the latch quickly, looked down on the pale and frightened face of Nancy Holbrook.

He asked a surprised question as she shoved past him, closing the door behind her.

She had dressed hastily, and her eyes looked wan and tired. "I couldn't sleep," she explained. "From my bedroom window I could see your lights burning. And then I thought I heard the press—what are you trying to do, Joe Rigdon?"

He grinned a little tiredly. He gestured toward the clanking press. "Take a look for yourself."

She did so, and then lifted her head in puzzlement. "I don't understand—"

"Bait," he said briefly. "I thought I could start something moving, this way, but—"

He had forgotten to latch the door a second time. It burst open suddenly, with a jar that shook the flimsy walls.

Whirling, he faced the men who moved across the threshold—Bill York and three others. Deputies, Rigdon thought. They were all armed and, as they fanned out guns appeared in the hands of two of them, effectively covering Rigdon and the girl.

Joe cursed inwardly. The fish had risen to the bait—and caught him flatfooted! And Nancy Holbrook's presence only added peril to the setup.

"All right!" the hulking marshal grunted, as he swung the door shut behind him. "We thought you were just bluffing, mister, until somebody heard the presses going. Maybe you'll find out mixing into goin's on in Vince Frazer's town was the worst mistake you ever made."

Fists clenching, Rigdon glared back at him. "You're provin' the point of that editorial right now, by bustin' in like this and throwin' down with your Colts. That's gun-rule—and you can't get away with it forever!"

"Big talk!" York sneered. He jerked his head at one of the men. "Go stop that press, and let's take a look at what he's runnin' off here."

It was Rigdon himself who reached and flipped the switch. The clatter of the press died. In the sudden silence, the deputy halted at the end of a single stride, astonishment flooding his ugly face.

"What the devil!" he blurted. "There's nothin' in it, Bill—no paper, no forms. He ain't been printin' a thing."

Bill York's unbelief hardened to something meaner, more dangerous. "If this is a joke, mister, we ain't in a mood to 'preciate it—not at two o'clock in the morning!"

A kind of sickness filled Joe Rigdon. He had thrown everything in a wild play—and seen it fail.

He shrugged, heavily. "You win, York. I thought I had a chance against you and your boss. I thought if the decent people of this town saw you move to stop me with open violence, it might give 'em something to fight for—especially if I lowered the odds a little. But it didn't work that way."

"The hell it didn't!" someone shouted.

Suddenly, somewhere, a gun spoke. In the room, a man fell. In a split-second flash Joe Rigdon got the picture, even as he was making a sideward leap toward the girl to seize her and push her down out of the line of fire.

He caught a glimpse of Tim Garber, of Walt Neeley with bandages showing under

the edge of his hat. There were others—the decent element of Red Butte. . . .

Frazer's crowd were working their guns near the front door. Tim Garber went down before their lead. Now Rigdon was on one knee and he had his own six-gun in his hand, and it was bucking. He dropped one on the gunslingers with his first, lucky shot. A wild slug pounded into one of the type cases, sending up a spray of the little metal pieces that pelted him as they fell.

Another of York's men folded and slewed down atop his fallen gun. Suddenly the marshal and his remaining deputy had had enough; the door was just behind them and as with one impulse they turned and went plunging through it. A last shot laced the dark opening. The gun echoes were dying as Joe Rigdon came lurching to his feet.

Those few moments of shooting had taken a heavy toll. Tim Garber was down, badly wounded; two others had been put out of the fight. Rigdon saw in the eyes of the rest a hint of the old caution that had kept them before from moving against Frazer. They were hanging back again, their newborn courage wavering.

"Damn it!" he shouted, brandishing his smoking gun. "We've got them running. Let's end this!"

Someone muttered, "Looks like Garber's done for—"

Joe's eyes sought the girl, found her backed into a corner, face blanched, but unharmed by the wild cross-sweep of lead. He felt a fierce rush of gratitude for that, even as he was yelling to her, "See what you can do for the wounded men, Nancy!" And to the others: "If there's any of you with nerve enough to finish what we've started—follow me!"

WITHOUT waiting for them, he started a run for the door. The street lay silent beyond it, under a full white moon and a deep sky freckled with stars, though here and there lamps were starting and windows were being run up.

Only two of the men had followed him—Walt Neeley and one other. As they ranged themselves on either side of him Rigdon demanded quickly, "Where would York go from here?"

"To report to Frazer—that could be out at the V-F Connected. Or more likely, the boss is waiting somewhere in town—"

"Come on."

They set out at a run down the center of the quiet, empty street. At the corner they burst into the main street, ducked back as a gun streaked quick flame and a bullet slapped into the facing of the corner post office, missing narrowly.

Out in the moon-drenched, empty thor-

oughfare, with the dark buildings staring sightlessly down, two figures were kicking up silvered spurts of dust as they sprinted for the cover of shadows across the way. The second one looked back to see the effect of his bullet, but Billy York's hulking figure went straight on, in its shuffling, hunch-shouldered run.

Joe Rigdon gritted, "York is mine. I don't care about the others, but York is my meat."

"Okay," grunted Neeley, and aimed deliberately.

At his shot the second figure flung its arms wildly and went down, the bullet taking him in the hip. York, seeing that safety was out of reach, stopped in mid-stride, whirling.

"Throw down your gun, York!" The weapons of all three of them, as they advanced across the moonbright dust, backed Rigdon's crisp order. "You're alone, and we've got you dead to rights!"

The gun-marshal faced them, head thrust forward, weapon still dragging down his arm as he stood like that, uncertain whether to make a desperate try against the three. Then, from the bunched shadows before the *Herald* office, another six-shooter lashed unexpectedly.

Rigdon heard the whine of the bullet as it passed overhead, started to swivel his own gun desperately in that direction. But Neeley's Colt was already in action. It was a lucky shot. There was a sharp outcry from the shadows, the clatter of a heavy weapon onto the resounding planks of the walk. And instantly Rigdon's gun muzzle came back full on the big shape of York. "For the last time—" he began, tightly.

York cursed, opened his big palm and let the weapon drop into the ruts at his feet.

"All right!" grunted Rigdon, and gestured with his gun barrel. "Move on over there. And move careful!"

Vince Frazer was huddled in the dirt at the edge of the board walk, groaning, clutching a shattered elbow.

Standing over him, with Neeley and the other at his back, Rigdon told the man coldly, "The string has run out, Frazer! You're lucky to be still alive. Maybe the folks you've bullied will let you saddle and ride—or maybe they'll want to hold you and see if there's a law that covers the crookedness you've done. I dunno."

Frazer's head tilted as he looked up at the other. "Damn you!" he gritted, voice tight with pain. "What business was it of yours—a damn, no good tramp printer?"

"This guy ain't no printer!" exclaimed

York, heavily. "He was bluffin'—runnin' that *Journal* press without paper or a stick of type in it!"

"That's right," Rigdon admitted, grinning faintly. "I'm a rancher, not a newspaperman. I couldn't even have run the press if old Holbrook hadn't showed me how. I thought for a bit of askin' him to set up the paper for me—but I didn't want to risk anybody else in my own wild scheme. So I played it alone."

Vince Frazer was staring at him. "Then what was the idea, asking for that job on the *Herald* today?"

"Well, as it happened, I wasn't asking for myself. I got a brother—"

"A brother?" echoed Bill York, hoarsely.

"Yes, York." Rigdon had turned and was facing the gunman levelly. "His name is Harry Rigdon. He asked me to try to find him a job, during my swing across the state, buying breed stock for my spread near Twin Falls. Harry ain't been working for a year, and he's got a wife and kids to support. He's just out of the hospital—crippled for life.

"You see, a bunch of toughs wrecked his newspaper down in Texas, shot him up, turned the press over on top of him and left him for dead—that's right, York! No wonder you thought you'd run across somebody before that looked like me!"

A lurking terror showed in York's small eyes. One thick hand went up as though to ward off a blow, or a bullet. He stumbled back a step, said, "If he hadn't put up a fight—"

"Folks in Red Butte have found out what happens to people who don't put up a fight!"

Suddenly, in his desperation, York took a wild chance. He was only yards from the passageway between the *Herald* office and the neighboring dark building. With a wild twist of his gross body he made a lunge for that opening; made it before anyone could stop him. In his surprise, Joe Rigdon stayed for a moment rooted where he was, then, cursing, he lunged forward.

He found himself in pitch blackness, as he crossed the wooden walk and the sides of the buildings closed in on him. But ahead was moonlight, limning the pole sides of a small corral; and then he saw the horse tethered, saddle ready on its back.

And Bill York, a black silhouette as he headed directly for that promise of freedom.

It was pure hate that changed his mind, that made him whirl away from the bronc instead of leaping up. And then Rigdon saw

(Continued on page 128)

ARE YOU BUYING SAVINGS BONDS?

APACHE — KID —

*Nobody knows just where the West's
worst Injun became a good, dead Injun—
for his bloody trail led exactly nowhere!*

His cold - blooded crimes
roused every man's hand
against him. . . .



DAWN came cold and dismal that 2nd of November, 1892. Glenn Reynolds, Gila County sheriff, spat in the camp-fire coals.

"Damn those Apaches. I'd love to see 'em swing."

Across from him, Hunky-Dory Holmes kicked a mesquite root into the fire, the edge of his heavy coat brushing the deputy's star on his vest. He yawned, his roly-poly face void of its usual happy-go-lucky grin.

By ROY VANDERGoot

"Hell of a night," he growled.

Rising, he turned stiffly to scowl at the seven figures huddled around the fire. All night he and Reynolds had sat up with their guns held across their knees and Hunky-Dory felt far from chipper. "Hey, you stinking sons of broncos!" he cursed the sleepers. "Get up!"

For emphasis he booted a couple unsoftly under the ribs.

"Take 'er easy, Hunky," Sheriff Reynolds warned. "They're our prisoners." He stood up, stretching his lean, well-muscled figure.

The six Apaches stirred, handcuffs jingling on wrists and ankles.

"Murderers, killers, devils from hell they are!" responded the disgruntled deputy. "They snored peacefully all night, having their dreams of torturing women and children, while you an' me had to stay awake to watch 'em." He stamped his feet. "Gosh-dang it, I feel dopey!"

From a rolled-up blanket, stage-driver Gene Livingston poked his tousled head.

"Good morning, gentlemen."

"What's good about it?" growled Holmes.

"Comin' closer to Yuma," Livingston yawned. "To Yuma and to Mary." He grinned broadly.

Hunky-Dory said something no gentleman is supposed to say. The sheriff said, "Get your horses spanned in, Gene; and let's start rolling."

After a frugal breakfast, the six Apaches were herded into the stage and the trek from Globe to Florence resumed. The six were on their way to Yuma prison for prolonged meditation of their trespasses of white man's law. From Florence, the Southern Pacific would furnish transportation, but a rough stretch of country lay yet between railpoint and last night's camping place.

The two law officers sat inside the stage with their prisoners, watching them like hawks. All six were tough cookies, but one of them, the Apache Kid, was especially wicked. Worse, he was smart.

The Apache Kid was the son of a minor chieftain, Toga-de-chuz. Toga had been murdered by an old-time enemy, and the Kid had avenged his old man by murdering the murderer. An eye for an eye was an old Apache custom. The Great White Father, however, frowned on such a primitive way of settling difficulties and the Kid, aware of that, had beaten it off the reservation. Outlawed by the whites, he had gone the owlhoot trail a la Apache and had committed the worst kind of depredations. Caught and sent to Yuma for a life-time stretch, he had been pardoned by Grover Cleveland.

Unable to forsake the easy trails of loot and murder, the Apache Kid had promptly taken

up his old practice of ravaging the countryside. A wily fox by instinct, he had learned new tricks in Yuma—white man's tricks. It was quite a while before the law was able to lay its hands on him again. But it had, and now the Kid was slated for adobe lonesome again, to repent his misdeeds at his leisure.

SITTING at first glum and wordless, the prisoners now began to jabber in their guttural tongue. Unfortunately, neither Sheriff Reynolds nor Hunky-Dory Holmes understood the lingo. So they just ignored it, sitting hunched in their heavy overcoats, buttoned high against the cold and buttoned also—unfortunately—over their six-guns. But they felt secure enough, with Reynolds holding a shotgun and Holmes a Winchester across their respective laps.

Presently the stage reached a steep, sandy wash. From the box, Gene Livingston shouted at the horses.

Reynolds stuck his head out of the window. "Hold it, Gene. We'll get out and walk."

The prisoners were ordered out and divided into two groups—three for Reynolds and three for Holmes. The horses started dragging the stage up the wash and the walkers followed, trudging in the loose sand.

Holmes and his three charges walked a little too fast to suit Reynolds and the sheriff hurried past his own group to order Holmes to go slower. As he passed the Apache Kid, the Indian leaped at him. Smashing the heavy handcuffs down upon Reynolds' skull, the savage screamed the Apache war-cry.

Reynolds staggered, blood spurting from his torn scalp. Desperately he wrestled with his assailant, fighting for his life. He flung the Apache around, but the cuffed arms had slipped around and down his body, pinning down his own. He couldn't rid himself of his opponent. Neither could he hit him nor bring his shotgun into action.

At the Apache Kid's first scream, Holmes' prisoners had hurled themselves at the chubby deputy. Holmes fell. The Winchester was wrenched from his grasp as moccasined feet kicked him in the face and heels rammed into his stomach. Hunky-Dory was getting meted out to him the kind of treatment he had so recently dished out. Cuffed hands lifted the Winchester high. Then its iron-plated butt smashed Hunky-Dory's skull, squashing his brains into the sand.

Then the renegades ran to assist the Apache Kid, whom the frantic Reynolds was flinging around like a stallion with a puma clinging to its back. The Winchester was rammed in the sheriff's belly and the trigger pulled. Reynolds screamed and dropped, and the Apache Kid jerked his locked arms down the lawman's bloody belly, whooping Apache triumph.

Gene Livingston leaned out of the stage and looked back. The Apache Kid leaped, snatched the Winchester, aimed and fired in a synchrony of smooth, lightning swift motion. It was a lucky shot—for the Kid.

The ball pierced Livingston's cheek and came out the back of his neck, missing the spinal cord and jugular vein by the narrowest of margins. Livingston tumbled into the boot and the frightened horses flung themselves into the traces. The stage lumbered up the wash. The wheels struck a rock and the bouncing vehicle hurled the driver's limp body to the ground.

The Apache Kid got the keys from the sheriff's pocket to unlock the cuffs. Then the renegades stripped the bodies, took clothes, guns and valuables, and faded into the hills. Overhead, a vulture wheeled; and from some distant hill, a coyote lifted its voice in eerie litany.

WHEN the Apaches had gone, Livingston, whom the renegades had thought dead, got to his feet and dragged his bleeding body to the little town of Riverside. A posse instantly took the field.

Six months after their break for freedom, Apache Kid's five fellows in crime were captured, tried and condemned to die on the gallows.

But the Apache Kid, worst of the lot, was still at large. He was nearly never seen, but he sure was heard of, and his handiwork was very much in evidence. Knowing that, should he be caught he was sure to swing, he murdered without compunction. Burned homes and scalped bodies, and bleaching bones found in the most ungodly places, attested his ferocity. His cold-blooded crimes roused every man's hand against him. Famous scouts took the field to track him. One and all they failed signally. They never quite tracked him down, though once or twice there was an unexpected encounter.

Zack Dupont, an old army scout, was snooping around in the Santa Catalinas one day when he came face to face with the Kid. The surprise was mutual, their reactions similar. Neither made a move to bring to bear the old single-shot rifles with which both were armed. Dupont knew the Apache Kid from his boyhood reservation days, and the Kid remembered the scout very well. Each knew that should his first shot fail to inflict a fatal wound, the other would surely kill him.

They looked at one another, standing like statues, rifles half lifted. Neither man said a word. Then, as if on signal, both backed off. Dupont backed against a boulder and sat down, gingerly, as if on a case of eggs—or maybe dynamite. The Kid followed suit.

From noon till sundown they sat like that.

Then the Apache Kid spoke up. "Me go," he grunted.

Rising, he cautiously backed off, fading into the dusk.

Dupont lost no time making himself scarce. He got out of the vicinity as fast as he knew how.

Another erstwhile Army scout, Wallapai Clarke, pursued the Apache Kid for two years, clinging to his trail like a leech and nosing out his hideouts and camping places till the Kid learned thoroughly to hate the persistent snooper. Wallapai in turn hated the Kid because the Apache had murdered his partner, Bill Diehl, and had stolen Wallapai's favorite horse, old Pete—which was worse.

One night, when Wallapai was snoring peacefully in his cabin, his partner, John Scanlon, shook him awake.

"Listen, Wallapai—"

Sure enough, something was stirring outside that was more furtive than coyote or mountain lion. Lifting his trusty Henry rifle from its peg above the door, Wallapai slipped out of the cabin and down to the horse corral.

Nothing was to be seen. The night was dark, with only the outlines of the surrounding hills showing against the star-studded sky. Then, atop a ridge, the scout's trained eye spotted movement. An Indian, leading a horse, was sneaking across the crest. The horse was old Pete.

Throwing the Henry to his shoulder, Wallapai fired. The Indian stumbled, fell. Another redskin popped up. Again Wallapai fired. The second Indian toppled over. After that, there was no more movement.

The next morning Wallapai went to inspect his marksmanship. He found an Apache squaw, shot through the belly. She was a good squaw. She was deadlier than a doornail.

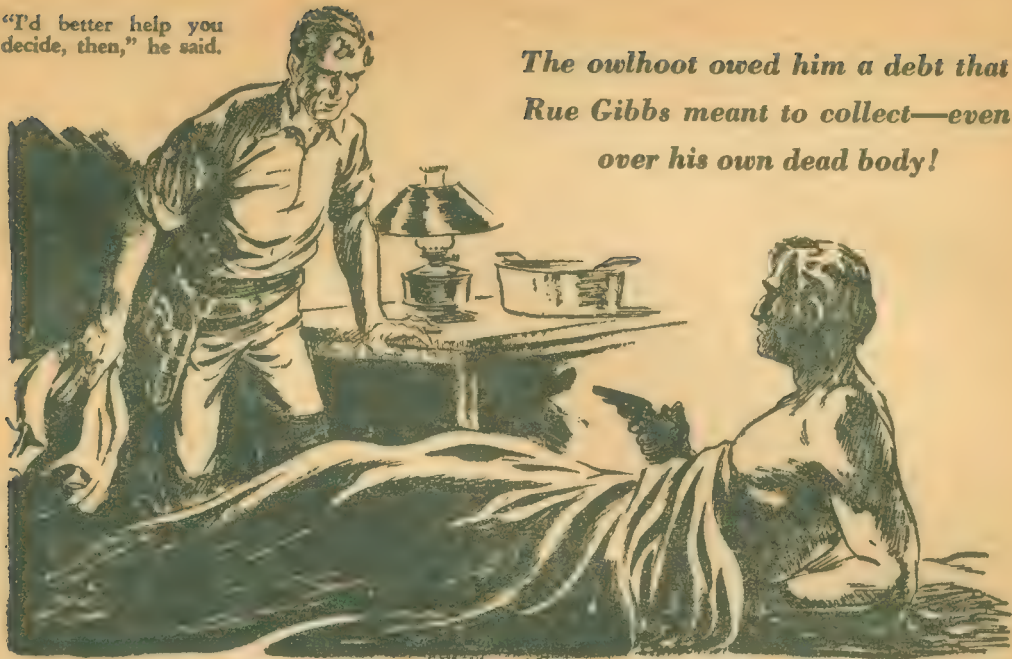
A spoor of blood showed where the other Indian had sneaked away. Wallapai trailed it and lost it. He never found the wounded Apache. And he never recovered old Pete. But from that day forward, no one saw the Apache Kid again. He raided no more and he ravaged no more. Had he been seriously wounded and left the country to maybe hide in Old Mexico? In the wild, trackless canyons of the Candelarias or the Sierra Madres where Geronimo, Old Nana and Cochise had sought and found refuge in their day? Or had he crawled away into one of his many secret hideouts and died there, miserable and alone?

Quien sabe?

And then again, maybe it wasn't the Apache Kid at all. But the likelihood is that it was he who got his come-uppance from Wallapai's old Henry rifle and that somewhere in the mountain fastnesses of southern Arizona his bones lie bleaching, unburied and unblessed.

"Td better help you decide, then," he said.

The owlhoot owed him a debt that Rue Gibbs meant to collect—even over his own dead body!



— BULLET — BARGAIN

THE blue, hot steel of the border sky pressed down across Ruel Gibbs and his horse as they picked their way across the rough, sandy ground. An hour more of border inspection and then home to the Vista Verde Ranch.

He laughed harshly, the sound strange on his lips. *Home for how long?* He shifted position to ease his aching back. How long did he have to wait before Morgan foreclosed? How long did a convicted man have to wait before the hangman arrived? How long did a son have to pay the penalty of a trusting father's faith in rotten human nature?

He was just turning north from the Rio Grande when he heard the first moan. He reined in and listened. It came again, a combination of moan and threshing. An animal—a steer, cow or horse—had been trapped

by the quicksand in a back channel. Rue Gibbs touched spurs lightly to Baldy, at the same time cursing himself for six kinds of a fool. Over there was Morgan's land. Chances were it was a Morgan beef, stuck in the mire. Chances were he'd get himself in one hell of a mess if he got into that slash. And chances were, he told himself, grinning in spite of his gloom, that no matter what the odds were, he'd be doing exactly what he was doing now.

That's why his nickname seemed to fit so well. "Rue" Gibbs—to other folks, "Rue" was just short for Ruel; to Gibbs himself it privately meant that he'd always have a lot to be rueful for, for one reason or another. *I'm just like the old man, he thought. Not enough sense to stay out of grief.*

The moaning and threshing were much closer now and, as Baldy stepped across a

By REESE WADE

slight hillock, he saw the source. He reined in.

The trapped animal was a horse. And the horse wasn't alone. A man was in the slough, too—a blue-bearded giant of a man with powerful shoulders, short legs, and guns swinging against both hips.

The man had dismounted and was trying to make his way out of the slash, leaving his horse to its fate. Rue Gibbs' blood began to boil even as he swung from the saddle and began searching for a stout piece of wood. To his mind, leaving a horse to die in quicksand was like murdering a human being. Worse, for few people did for a man what his horse would.

As he worked, he continued to be aware of the man. The blue beard and heavy shoulders, the gray, cold eyes, and the pair of guns held something familiar. And then he knew. Those same eyes had stared back at him from a poster in the sheriff's office at Willow not two weeks ago. Blue Hutchins—leader of the gang which held up the railroad and escaped with a big shipment of gold, leaving trainmen dead on the ground. DEAD OR ALIVE the poster said. Five thousand reward. And here he was, very much alive, waiting for Rue Gibbs to carve a solid path from shore to his sinking feet.

Sweating from the sun and hot anger at the outlaw's treatment of his horse, Rue Gibbs worked swiftly. With an abandoned fence post he began spading from the bank into the uneasy sand. Hutchins watched silently, and silently knelt to knit his fingers around the end of the post as Rue Gibbs shoved it forward. Leaning back, Gibbs heaved the post an inch at a time. Hutchins, belly-flat to the sand, snaked his way forward to the solid earth of the bank. Then, without a word, he sought another post and returned to work beside Gibbs in spading out a wider trail to the horse.

With Hutchins anchoring his right hand, Rue Gibbs leaned forward with his left until he could grasp the bridle. Then slowly, with soft talk to the frenzied animal, he led the horse from the sucking sand into the narrow channel, and then up on the bank.

Still not speaking, Hutchins mounted his horse. Rue turned to thrust his foot into Baldy's stirrup. The voice that cracked behind him was sharp and biting. "Lift 'em, pardner!" Rue whirled to look into the black mouth of Hutchin's left hand gun. The outlaw's eyes were hard and narrow as he nudged his horse forward to where Rue stood, hands in air.

"I hate to do this, but—" he leaned down, flipped Rue's gun from its holster, and tossed it up onto a little hillock into a clump of filleree—"you can get your gun after I'm across the Rio Grande. If you ain't guessed who I am

already, you will now. *Buenas dias, compadre.*"

Rue Gibbs watched the bandit leader splash his tired horse across the Rio Grande into Mexico and disappear from sight; then he climbed the hill to recover his gun. To Baldy, who trailed him patiently, he snorted. "I guess you'd say we'd been a mite careless, pard. If the sheriff knowed we'd let Blue Hutchins slip through our fingers, we'd be in for a hangin'—and damned if we wouldn't deserve it."

He looked once again across the border river—the strange little stream which slashed its way between two nations—and set out along the bank again. Blue Hutchins or not, he still had to complete his inspection of his ranch's borders.

HOOFBEATS behind him pulled Rue around in the saddle again. The man who galloped into view across the low rise of land was not Blue Hutchins. He was an older man, with yellow trails of tobacco across his dirty beard.

"A little off your trail, ain't you, Gibbs?" Rue Gibbs stared back at the older man with obvious hatred. "I'm on my property, Morgan."

"Not very far on it, Gibbs. Seems to me you might have been on my property a few minutes ago. Some fresh hoof prints back there along the bank."

"This ain't the only horse that makes prints."

The older man spat and stared intently at Rue. "Seems like there might have been two horses up there on my place just now. One of 'em seems to have been stuck in the sand and the other one pulled him out. One of 'em seems to have gone over into Mexico, too."

Rue Gibbs said nothing. The crawling feeling along his back made him straighten his shoulders viciously.

Morgan spat again and changed the subject. "About due to make a little payment on that property, ain't you, Gibbs?"

"I'll make it, Morgan."

"Will you, now?" The old man laughed, a crafty, cruel laugh. "I was just thinkin' it would be quite a joke if all of a sudden this whole piece of land was my property. Wouldn't it now? There wouldn't be any place you could ride without being on my land. And I don't like folks to ride on my land."

Gibbs rode steadily forward. He spoke from the side of his mouth. "You're on my land now, Morgan. It's my land, and it belonged to my daddy before me, and you're the only man who ain't welcome to ride on it."

Morgan yanked his horse around so hard the animal whinnied and Rue felt his muscles tighten. "You better have that payment, Gibbs. Your father was a fool before you

and you're a fool now. And you have that payment on time, or you'll be a range bum again, like your old man was before he settled here."

Morgan struck spurs deeply into the sides of his horse and galloped back in the direction from which he had come.

Rue Gibbs felt a chill strike into him. Then in the sickening way a man's mind will name the thing it fears, the exact amount of what he owed. Morgan floated foremost in his thoughts—*Five thousand dollars. . .*

Five thousand dollars!

He sat bolt upright in the saddle. Five thousand dollars was the price on the head of the outlaw, Blue Hutchins—he had just let five thousand dollars slip right out of his hands. His brow wrinkled in savage furrows. *Not sense enough to stay out of grief—and not even sense enough to come in out of it. . .*

Blood pounding his face, he patted Baldy's neck. *Damn it! he thought, I don't care. I ain't the kind who'll rescue a gent from the quicksand and let his hoss drown. To git the drop on that hombre, that's what I'd have had to do. . .*

Baldy snorted and Rue Gibbs settled back in the saddle.

He glanced back toward Morgan's ranch. The cold breath of trouble passed over him, and he turned again to the vision of his own place. It was peaceful, sleepy and quiet—a peaceful place for a peaceful man—a man whose life should have sat right with the world and his neighbors. Not the place of a man who had turned his back on an outlaw—a man who didn't know today how he would hold his ranch tomorrow. . . .

A WEEK later after starting his punchers toward the North Flats Ranch to round up some badly-needed scattered stock, Rue Gibbs rode into the town of Willow. He needed supplies, a drink, and the latest news.

The supplies were easy—bacon, flour, salt pork, some sugar and coffee. The drink was easy, too. "Rye for Rue, and make it neat."

The news was what was hard to take. They were talking about it in the saloon and in the sheriff's office.

Blue Hutchins' gang had struck again—once more at the railroad. They'd got gold dust and ingots valued at \$100,000 and killed two trainmen. Rue's hands turned icy, despite the summer heat, and he felt his lips drawing into a hard, thin line. He almost felt he'd had a hand in those killings.

"They get any of the gang?" he asked softly.

The sheriff was polishing the barrel of his gun. He looked up slowly at Rue, then spoke. "Two dead at the scene—wounded some more

we hope. The train crew thinks they hit four or five for sure."

"How about Hutchins himself?" Rue asked slowly.

The sheriff glanced up again. "Some folks think Blue Hutchins had help in gettin' away from these holdups." The sheriff was staring at him, his eyes gray and disturbing. "Some folks think that we'd have had Blue the last time if somebody hadn't helped him across the Rio Grande into Mexico."

"Oh." Rue Gibbs could think of nothing else to say. It was then that he glanced into the other room of the sheriff's office and saw a man sitting there, staring with eyes of hatred.

It was Morgan.

"Gibbs rides along the Rio Grande a lot, sheriff," Morgan growled. "Maybe he's seen something of Hutchins."

The sheriff was watching Rue Gibbs closely. "How about it, Gibbs? Any ideas that might help?"

Rue Gibbs felt that he was being backed into a corner. If he admitted that he had helped Hutchins, he'd be lynched before he left town—the temper of this range was running high. And yet he wasn't going to lie about it. . . .

Morgan's rasping, vicious voice broke through the stillness. "He trails with outlaws, like his old man did before him. Remember when Old Gibbs hid the Jacobs gang in his house."

Rue Gibbs slashed a fist at Morgan. He felt his knuckles breaking through flesh, felt the warm tide of blood running across his hand and down his arm, felt the hammering blows of his arm strike again and again into Morgan's face.

Violent hands jerked him away and flung him against the door.

"That's enough, Gibbs." The sheriff's voice cut like a whip. "Start for home while you're able. And remember—the people of this country don't like people who trail with the wild bunch. You're bein' watched, Gibbs. If you know what's good for you, you'll help us find Blue Hutchins."

A hand shoved him through the door and he was floundering on the steps, tasting the swirls of dust that rose from the streets of Willow. Then he was on his way home again, raging with humiliation and defeat. They had tainted the memory of his father—his father, who couldn't turn away a suffering human being from his door, no matter who it was.

Rue Gibbs swore until the words lost their meaning—and when he'd stopped a curious peace settled over him. The words had been out of character. They didn't fit a Gibbs, and somehow that knowledge helped steel him to the battle he knew was ahead.

IT WAS just after two o'clock that the noise shook him awake. For a moment he couldn't think of where he was. For a moment he was hearing Morgan's spiteful words again, and hearing the accusing voice of the sheriff. Then he knew that it was another sort of noise, a noise coming from under his window.

He slipped to his feet and thrust his gun under his belt. As he lit a candle and made his way through the lonely house to the front door, he told himself that it was impossible. And yet, before he reached the source of the sound, he knew that it *was* possible—that it had, somehow, come to him again.

Blue Hutchins lay on the ground beneath his window. The outlaw's hands were clutching into the earth again and again as the waves of pain sent his muscles into agonized spasms. His breathing was rasping and raw, and there was in it something liquid.

Rue carried Blue Hutchins into the house, and washed and disinfected two wounds. His mind kept telling him that it was all an astounding coincidence. Yet he knew, even before Hutchins opened his eyes and rasped out his first tormented words, that it was no coincidence.

"Howdy, pard," Hutchins whispered with an effort.

His body collapsed from the effort of speaking, and Rue sponged cold water across his forehead. The blue beard made a dark mass against the paleness of his skin. In a moment he gathered his strength again. "Found out—who you was—where you lived. This time came—because you—last chance." The heavy eyes closed in a coma and Rue saw the massive chest lift and sink.

He dressed and went softly from the room. He knew what he should do. Tie Blue Hutchins to the bed and go for the sheriff. That's what he *should* do—but the old feeling was sweeping through him again, the weakness and the strength which he had inherited from his father. To turn a dying man, a helpless man, over to the sheriff. . . .

He walked out to the bunkhouse, grappling with his thoughts. The boys were still away at the North Flats Ranch. He knew they would be, and knew also that he had been half hoping that some chance would have sent them back. The weight of their opinions might force him to turn Blue Hutchins over to the law regardless of his condition.

For a moment he wondered if he was himself only a half honest man.

A voice from the darkness startled him and he felt his muscles tense and jerk. "Up a little late, aren't you, Gibbs?"

It was the sheriff's voice. A shadow materialized from the deeper shadow of night and stood before him.

"Any reason for being up so late, Gibbs?" Ruel Gibbs felt the clamp of his jaw tightening as he faced the sheriff. "Can't sleep," he said briefly.

"Oh," the sheriff paused significantly. "Thought maybe you was expectin' visitors."

"Who would be visitin' me, sheriff?" He shot the words back in a flat, hot tone.

The sheriff stood quietly, staring through the blackness of the shadow which was Ruel Gibbs. In the silence of the night, Gibbs could hear the soft movements of the sheriff's horse. There was no way of knowing when the lawman had ridden stealthily across the range to the house. He might have arrived a few minutes ago—or he might have been waiting for the past hour.

"Mind if I look through your house, Gibbs?"

Gibbs squared his shoulders and held down the anger which burned in his throat.

"You here as a friend, sheriff?"

"I'm here as the law, Gibbs."

"Then ask the law if you can search my house. It's my property and you're not welcome."

The sheriff didn't answer directly. After a moment, he strode to his horse and mounted swiftly. Then he rode close by where Gibbs stood. "We found a horse this evening that might have been ridden by Blue Hutchins, Gibbs. We found evidence that a wounded man had started afoot some place. Your place is about the only place near to where Blue Hutchins' horse was found. You still don't want me to look through your house?"

"Good night, sheriff," Rue Gibbs said gently.

The sheriff's voice was vicious as it slashed through the darkness. "You've had your chance, Gibbs. Remember that." There was a crunching of sod and the sheriff was gone, a black figure melting into the black night, a drumfire of hoofbeats rolling back across the stillness.

BLUE HUTCHINS was awake as Rue Gibbs entered the room again. The rancher sat down in a chair beside the bed, fed matchlight to the candle, and stared deep into the outlaw's eyes. "Let's get it straight, Hutchins," he said shortly. "That day on the river I let myself get into position where you could throw a gun on me. You got away. Since then you've robbed and killed. I could have stopped you, so I'm to blame for those killings. Now you've come back again. It was the worst mistake you could have made. This time I'm turning you in."

He waited, thinking Hutchins would flare back at him, curse him, defy him. But Blue Hutchins said nothing for a long minute. Then he replied simply, "Okay, I'd rather

have you turn me in than any other man." He grinned weakly. "I figger you earned the reward when you pulled me and my horse out of that slough." Hutchins laughed, coughed, sank back into the bed, his eyes tight against the pain.

Rue Gibbs stormed from the house, gnawing at the cord of character which seemed to bind his movements. It should have been easy to ride down the road and bring back the sheriff, to let the law have its way with Blue Hutchins. And yet, outlaw though he was, Hutchins was helpless. He wouldn't have a chance. . . .

Hutchins was watching the door as Rue went back into the bedroom. The big man's eyes were half closed and there was a quiet, almost secret grin on his lips. "Know what I'd like, Gibbs?" he asked. "A shave. I'd like to get this beard off my face. Makes it kinda hot here."

Gibbs grinned a little, warmed some water, and shaved the heavy blue beard off the outlaw's face. Without the beard he was a changed man; his expression was softer, friendlier. It would be hard to recognize the outlaw he had rescued from the Rio Grande as this smooth-faced stranger. Gibbs wondered briefly if he were making a fool of himself again—if this was part of the outlaw's plan to escape unrecognized.

"Thanks," said Hutchins. Then he asked, "Decided what to do with me yet?"

The question brought Gibbs face to face with his problem again and fury welled up within him. "No," he said harshly. "I'd do as much as I've done for a sheep-killing dog."

Blue Hutchins' face spread into a wider grin, and his hands moved slightly beneath the covers. "I'd better help you decide then," he said in the sharp, cruel voice that Gibbs had first heard from the quicksand. His hand came from beneath the covers and it held a short derringer. "When you put a patient to bed, Doctor Gibbs," he said mockingly, "you ought to take off all his clothes. Never know what you might find." His face froze into a mask of coldness. "Put up your hands, Gibbs. And throw me a clean shirt. We're moving out."

Rue Gibbs stared in shocked amazement at the derringer. Blue Hutchins swung his body sideways on the bed, slipped his feet into boots, stamped them down. He lifted Gibbs' gun from its holster and laughed. He swayed slightly on his feet, but otherwise he seemed to be stronger than at any time since he came into the house. Maybe it was a miracle of recovery. Or maybe it was just part of the trick and he hadn't been seriously wounded at all.

Motioning Gibbs ahead with the derringer, Blue Hutchins prodded his captive toward the corral. He watched in silence while Rue

caught up two horses and saddled them. Holding the derringer on Rue, and motioning for him to stand back, the outlaw struggled his way into the saddle. For a moment he swayed uncertainly, then his back straightened; the sneering smile came back to his lips, and he gestured toward the other horse.

"You're ridin' ahead of me, Gibbs. If anyone tries to stop us, you'd better talk 'im out of it. The whole state of Texas is lookin' for Blue Hutchins, but one of Rue Gibbs' pals ought to get through safe. You're my insurance for crossin' the border. If they catch me here, I'll swing anyway, so I won't mind takin' you with me."

Rue swung into the saddle, fighting hard to keep a hold on himself. With every fiber in his being he wanted to smash his fists into that taunting, clean-shaved face that wouldn't be recognized as belonging to the country's most wanted outlaw. He writhed inwardly, but knew that he could do nothing. The derringer would cut him down before he could cross half the distance to Hutchins.

"Ride for the border," Hutchins said behind him. Rue touched spurs to Baldy and the horse settled to a pace which would put them at the Rio Grande within an hour. Behind him, Hutchins put his horse to the same pace, and the pounding hoofs beat in a deadly duet. Rue Gibbs looked back over his shoulder, but Blue Hutchins sat tall in the saddle, his derringer resting firmly on his right thigh, his left hand holding the reins. The outlaw's face was dark and set, a face of cruelty and dishonor. The fury surged again in Rue Gibbs and he hated Hutchins now as he had once pitied him. But it was still Hutchins' play.

Then into the rhythm of pounding hoofs came another sound, a deeper and fainter sound. Rue Gibbs turned in his saddle and stared toward the west. Horsemen, riding low and fast, were approaching. He didn't need Blue Hutchins' warning gasp to tell him that the horsemen were following them.

"There they are," the big man grunted. "Right on time." Then Rue heard Hutchins' mount closing in behind him, heard Hutchins' sharp, cutting voice. "Better talk 'em out of it, Gibbs." He felt the hard, painful jolt of the derringer slamming against his ribs.

"Lawmen are easy to figure, Gibbs," the outlaw said. "Give 'em a plain lead and they'll always do what you expect. When I dragged myself to your place, I knew the law would follow me there. And when I heard the sheriff last night, I knew he'd be back about this time—"

Rue Gibbs swung about in his saddle, eyes wide with amazement, just in time to see Hutchins urge his horse to a final burst of speed and lurch him hard against Gibbs' own

(Continued on page 129)



John Marble shouted rather foolishly, "It's Indians!"

BULLETS ON THE —TONTO TRAIL—

By LANCE KERMIT

THE road—if you could call it such—passed in places through barren flats where the powdery, volcanic dust rose head-high at the slightest stirring. Under the broiling sun the party of eleven men was enveloped in a dense cloud of it. They moved with caution, as well they might, for this was 1852 and the Indians in Arizona were neither cowed nor subdued.

Of this, the party was aware. At the Colorado crossing, the ferryman had warned them

the Yumas were on the warpath. Major Heintzelman, commanding Fort Yuma, was even then conducting a campaign against them. Because of that warning, the party had traveled by night instead of by day, until Cremony assured them they had passed the Yumas' camp.

But now there was another menace. Out of the choking cloud, John Wollaston spoke sharply.

"Damn this dust! Can't see a blame' thing.

Few men saw the invisible red-skinned dust devils of the Tonto Trail—and lived. But Captain John Cremony had a reason!

Figger there's any danger from Indians here, Captain Cremony?"

Out of the muffling obscurity came John Cremony's voice, calm and considered. "There's always danger in this country, Mr. Wollaston. We've passed the Yumas' camp, to be sure, but the Tontos have the reputation of roaming far to the westward."

"How can we know?" asked John Kendricks querulously. "In this damn dust I can't see my horse's ears, let alone an Indian's feathers."

"Apaches—" explained Cremony—"and the Tontos are Apaches—don't wear feathers. They wear a kind of turban—any old rag wrapped around their heads. In that they stick a tuft of grass, or a few weeds, or some twigs of greasewood of sagebrush. They're quite good at camouflage. If you see a bit of grass or some brush acting queerly, chances are it isn't."

"Sure glad you told me," wise-cracked Kendricks. "Now I'll be on the look-out for some sage acting too smart."

"Anybody got any water left?" asked Ted Houston. "Mine's all gone."

"This fool mule of mine," said John Wollaston thoughtfully, "is acting damn funny."

"I've noticed that," said Cremony.

The mule's behavior worried the captain. The beast's uneasiness kept Cremony on edge. He knew mules, and he knew Indians. And his responsibility weighed heavily upon him.

The party had come all the way from San Diego where Cremony, who had served as interpreter for the Boundary Commission, had been discharged upon completion of the survey. The ten would-be prospectors had engaged him as a guide at a salary of \$500 per month. They thought Cremony's experience with Indians and his knowledge of the terrain worth the money.

And it was; but no man's eyes could penetrate dust as thick as that cloud turned out to be. This was a flat plain, Cremony knew, with neither boulders nor brush nor gullies to conceal Apaches. But who could tell what lay beyond that dust? No one. And there was only the mule's uneasiness to caution a man.

Silence folded over the party. The sun smote her fiercest. The dust grew thicker.

Ten miles back of them was Johnson's Well. Bitter Wells was five miles ahead. About four miles to their left, Antelope Peak rose bleak and dour above the plain, while somewhat the same distance to their right the Cimarron Mountains frowned upon their passing. Ahead, and a bit to the right, the Santa Rosas beckoned. There lay their goal, and, maybe, the gold. And maybe there lay something else. . . .

No one spoke. There was only the heat and the silence and the suffocating dust. There

was only the muffled shuffling of hoofs in the dust, the labored breathing of horse and mule, the creaking of saddle leather and packing gear. John Wollaston wasn't cussing any more, and Jim Kendricks had ceased his wise-cracking. Ted Houston had stopped complaining about the heat and his thirst, and Captain Cremony was wishing they were safely at the Santa Rosas.

Cremony was riding close to the rear. Every fifteen minutes a man changed from the front to the rear so that each might have the benefit of breathing better air up front, though there was little difference. But the arrangement prevented bickering and dispute, and that was the main thing.

Cremony now called out, "I'm coming up front, pronto. I don't like the way my mule acts."

As if his words had been a signal, rifle fire exploded beyond the dust's margin. Bullets smacked home; arrows struck. Heathen shrieks interlaced the yelling from the panic stricken party.

Instantly all was pandemonium. Horses and mules screamed and kicked in pain and terror. John Marble shouted, rather foolishly, "It's Indians!"

"Off your mounts!" Cremony bellowed. "Down with you!"

How many obeyed him, how many were able, he could not tell. The dust was denser now by several times. But the firing told him that some order had been established and that the men were fighting back now.

There was no reason they shouldn't give a good account of themselves. Each man had at least one rifle, two new-type revolvers, and a large hunting knife. Cremony had seen to that before they left San Diego.

"Stay calm, men," he instructed. "Don't waste ammunition. Shoot at the sound of them. Stay low."

PRESENTLY the firing steadied. The men were aiming now, if only at sound. Once in a while a fiendish howl would reward their blind shooting.

The first surprise volley had hit two mules and three horses. None of the eleven men had been hit. The dense dust had prevented the attackers from seeing their targets and they had shot too low.

Two of the wounded animals had dropped, one had run off. The fallen beasts, along with the other two wounded ones, the men killed out of mercy and for the use of their carcasses as breastworks.

As the men lay there, taking potshots at anything that made sound or loomed in the dust, the cloud gradually settled somewhat and things beyond it assumed outlines. Suddenly

John Wollaston shouted, "Watch out, boys! Here they come."

They emptied their rifles at the onrushing horde. Several of the savages fell. The rest, howling like fiends incarnate, came on.

"Up men!" Cremony ordered. "And use your revolvers."

At close range, these modern weapons executed carnage. But the time was too brief and the Tontos too many. They broke through the wall of lead. And at that range their stubby bows did deadly service. John Marble was hit, and so was Wollaston.

Cremony heard Jim Kendricks cry out in agony and knew that Kendricks had reached the end of the trail. And then a giant Tonto hurled himself at Cremony. He was naked save for a breech-clout, his muscular body agleam with oil and sweat.

Cremony had fired his revolver empty and in the melee his big knife had been lost. All he had was a double-edged dagger with a four inch blade. Clutching it, he set himself to battle the Tonto.

As the howling Apache flung himself upon Cremony, the captain grasped with his left hand his assailant's right wrist. At the same time he lunged the dagger underhandedly at his enemy's abdomen.

But the big Tonto was a seasoned veteran. He in turn, with a lightning-swift move, grasped with his left hand Cremony's right wrist.

The advantage was not even, except for the Tonto's superior physique and the length of his murderous knife. They stood, eye to eye, straining and tugging, testing one another's strength. Sweat was pouring from them and their breaths came in grunting sobs.

The issue could not long remain in doubt. Of that, Cremony was well aware. Already he could feel his hold slipping on his opponent's oily wrist. Once he lost his grip of the savage, the greased body of the Tonto offered little hold.

With a sudden fling of his right foot, Cremony tripped the enemy. The Apache plunged to the ground. But he didn't let go of Cremony. He bore the captain down into dust with him.

With a sinuous twist of his lithe body, the Tonto lunged around and up and the next instant was astride Cremony. Planting his right knee on Cremony's left hand, he pinned that member to the ground. Still holding on to Cremony's right wrist, the Apache jerked his own knife aloft for the final plunge.

The dust prevented anyone from seeing the captain's plight. Moreover, each man was busy fighting for his own life and had his hands more than full. At that moment Cremony knew he was staring death in the face.

The Tonto's horrible grimace reflected sav-

age triumph. Through bared teeth he hissed, "*Pindah lickoyi das—ay-go, dee dah tatsan!*"

"The white-eyed man—he will soon be dead!"

Then his knife slashed down.

Cremony jerked his head aside. The knife, intended to slit his throat, plunged into the ground. The Tonto's hand was next to Cremony's mouth, the thumb almost touching the captain's teeth.

Instantly Cremony clamped those teeth around the thumb.

The Apache shrieked with pain and fury. His sinuous body writhed and twisted in the most amazing contortions in his frantic efforts to free his thumb. But Cremony hung grimly on. The Tonto tried to sink his teeth in Cremony's face, and Cremony butted him in the mouth.

The Tonto screamed, spat out teeth, and then lunged with his left hand for the knife, letting go of Cremony's right wrist.

This change of tactics proved to be his last.

The Tonto's knife was stuck deep in the soil and there was a second's delay in his extracting it. Cremony instantly plunged his double-edged dagger between the Apache's ribs, just under his left arm. The Tonto straightened with a scream that rose thin and shrill in the death-heralding ululation. Again Cremony plunged the blade deep. The Tonto's body jerked in a final spasm. A convulsion contracted his giant muscles. Then slackness ran through his sweating body. . . .

Cremony let go of the thumb, rolled the greasy carcass aside, and struggled to his feet, gasping and hardly believing he was still alive.

As the Tonto chieftain's death-cry rang out, the other Apaches recoiled, beaten. They had lost ten men dead. How many were wounded, Cremony never could ascertain.

But the party had suffered losses too. Jim Kendricks was dead. John Wollaston, John Marble, and Ted Houston were wounded, the latter two so seriously, they died soon after reaching Tucson.

This broke up the party. The remaining members had lost their yen for looking for gold in Apache country. They trekked back East again where things were less turbulent and bloody.

Theirs was an old story.

Captain John Cremony, however, stayed. He made quite a name for himself in the West, fighting Indians and guiding emigrants and assisting surveyors and road builders. Part of his noteworthy career was spent as Indian agent on the Apache reservation at Bosque Redondo in eastern New Mexico. He understood the Apaches, and the Apaches had learned to understand him—those who survived.

CATTLE COUNTRY QUIZ



By **HALLACK McCORD**

(Answers on page 103)

HOW'S your rannyan rating these days—pretty fair? Then test yourself on the following twenty questions and see how high you can score. Call the turn on eighteen or more correctly, and you're in the expert class. Answer sixteen or seventeen, and you're good. Answer fifteen, and you're still not in the greenhorn class.

1. If the ranch boss sent you out to obtain a "wrangatang," you would return with: A monkey? One of the day wranglers? A device used for cutting fence wire? A member of a certain Indian tribe?

2. In the language of the Westerner, a "work horse" is: A horse which is used in the harness? A cowpuncher who works harder than his fellows? A cowpuncher who, because of some misconduct, has been given menial jobs to do? A sheep herder?

3. True or false? In the West, the horse ridden by a long-legged cowpuncher is sometimes jokingly referred to as a "walking stick."

4. What is the meaning of the cowpuncher slang term, "visiting harness?"

5. True or false? In cow country terminology, the expression, "tartantula juice," is used in reference to water from a salt well.

6. According to the cowman's interpretation of the term, what is the meaning of the expression "talking horse?"

7. To the old time Westerner, the term, "state's eggs," meant: Eggs shipped to the cow country from the Eastern states? Eggs pilfered from the nest of a wild bird? Powdered eggs used by the camp cook? Rotten eggs?

8. True or false? A "steer horse" is a horse which, when hitched to a wagon, will follow a road without the necessity of being steered.

9. True or false? "Skookum" is an old time slang word meaning "bad," "mean," or "unsatisfactory."

10. What is a "single roll?"

11. If a cowpuncher friend of yours told you he was going to look up a "sharpshooter," you would know he was seeking: A type of cattle buyer? A man with an especially accurate shooting eye? A gambler with a crooked reputation? A cowtown politician?

12. In old time Western slang, the word, "shakedown," meant: Blackmail? Robbery? Bed? A rough-riding, springless cart? A horse with an especially jerky gait?

13. True or false? A "parrot-bill" is a type of pistol.

14. If you heard a friend of yours had been "paunched," you would: Be alarmed? Be angered? Be pleased? Feel no change in emotion whatsoever?

15. Under what circumstances might a Westerner do a "mid-air dance?"

16. On a Western ranch, the "miller" is one who: Takes care of the windmills? Takes care of the grain? Takes care of the flour? Collects insects?

17. What is the difference between John Henry, John Law, and Johnny-come-lately?

18. True or false? "Jingling" is a type of gait similar to a trot.

19. What is the meaning of the expression "raised on sour milk?"

20. What is a rannyan?



THE QUICK-

Like most gents who live by the gun, Flowerpot Pratt and his sidekick might not be too long for this world—but Tailholt's hanging sheriff sure thought they had been!

THEY were a peculiar pair, this Flowerpot Pratt and his pardner, Long Jim Lane—as mismatched a team as ever trespassed into the Fandango Hills. Pratt was so broad that he seemed short. He slumped beneath a shapeless sombrero that looked as if it had been tromped by seven shod brones, and his shaggy sorrel beard bushed out like the burr-tangled tail of a timber wolf half dead with distemper. Lane, on the other hand, sat tall in the saddle with his Triple-X Stetson at a rakish tilt and his angular face freshly shaved.

Even the pardners' voices were distinctly different in tone and revealed a definite disunity in the ways of their thinking. As now, when Long Jim peered at the town ahead and drawled pleasantly, "Tailholt, the garden spot of Arizona."

"Garden spot—my eye!" Flowerpot scoffed in a voice like the croak of a frantic frog. "Don't forgit we was on the losin' side of that Lincoln County fracas, Jim. Our names is still on wanted circulars all over this dad-blamed country. We should ride around. Tailholt's the county seat and they got a sheriff there."

Long Jim said impatiently, "I read you that piece in the Tombstone Epitaph which said Sheriff Sam Bradley had gone to Tucson for an operation on his eyes. What you worryin' about?"

"But it also said a deppity had been appointed," Flowerpot insisted.

Long Jim loosed a sigh. "You," he accused, "are a calamity crank. That is, according to Webster."

"One o' them Eastern dudes, huh?" Flowerpot scoffed. "Like them as print pretty words on paper about how the government might grant us galoots amnesty, but what the heck good is amnesty to a man on the dodge?"

A hoof tromp sounded behind them and they swiveled in their saddles to see a hard-running horse with a low-perched rider come toward them.

"Might be a U. S. marshal who's trailed us here," Flowerpot sighed. "We better rattle our hocks in a hurry."

Long Jim merely shrugged.

Then, as the approaching rider came close, Flowerpot blurted, "It's a she!"

And so it was; a she whose sun-burnished blonde hair streamed behind her like a golden banner, and whose pretty face blanched with fright as she swung her sweat-lathered bay bronc sharply away from the two men in the trail, then quirted the animal toward town as if pursued by seven devils.

"Gosh a'mighty," Flowerpot ejaculated. "I wonder what made her look so scairt."

Long Jim gave his dust-peppered pardner a deliberately appraising consideration. He asked finally, "You looked in a mirror lately?"

When Flowerpot shook his head, Long Jim asked, "Well, then, ever want to see an unmade bedroll that'd been trampled into a muddy mess by stampeding steers and was left to rot while kangaroo rats raised a litter of young that romped in the mildewed soogans until they were driven out by a family of snakes that used the bedroll at skin-shedding time for six consecutive seasons?"

"Nope, I never did," Flowerpot admitted.

"Then don't look into a mirror," Long Jim counseled, and urged his roan gelding to a shuffling walk.

Pratt sat in frowning puzzlement for a moment, then brought his mind to bear on less fantastic realities. Overtaking his pardner, he declared, "I still say we should circle around Broken Bow, Jim. That deppity sheriff might have some pitchers of us with our names on 'em, also how we look, so's it'd be purely impossible for him to miss guessin' who we was the minute he lays eyes on us."

"Quit worryin'," Long Jim advised.

"Somethin' I ain't told you," Flowerpot said ominously. "I had a awful dream last night. I drempt I was a kid back in the orphanage and the head master was comin' at me with that whip he used to whale us with. He kept comin' closer and closer, and his eyes opened wider and wider until they was bigger'n slop buckets. We better hide out in the brush a spell longer, Jim."

"Eatin' prickly pear blossoms may be jest

By L. ERNENWEIN

AND THE DEAD



I myself was deceived by Mr. Jugg's appearance at first. . . .

right fer a bull butterfly like you," Long Jim said, "but I need more nourishing food. We're riding into town."

"And we'll probably spend the rest of our life eatin' in jail," Flowerpot complained dejectedly.

LIKE most desert country cownowns, Broken Bow was an unlovely scatter of crumbling old 'dobes and false-fronted frame structures, with a cattle corral at one end of Main Street and a cemetery at the other. In one respect, however, it was unique—it's bank, The Cattlemen's Trust & Deposit, had been robbed twice within a month and although few cattlemen trusted it and fewer deposited money in it, the bank was still open for business.

Of course Flowerpot Pratt and Long Jim Lane had no inkling of this unusual situation

as they rode past the town dump at the eastern extremity of Main Street. As the two partners came abreast of the cattle corrals, Long Jim said in his best town talk, "Here's a splendid opportunity for minor ablution."

He dismounted at a watering trough, removed his sweat-stained shirt and proceeded to slosh the dust of travel from his face and upper body.

Flowerpot Pratt growled disgustedly, "Ablution! To listen to you them damyanks fought a Civil War just to give slaves the right to wash their face."

Long Jim took a clean shirt from his war-bag behind the saddle and put it on, then used the soiled shirt to dust his boots.

"You look like a Gentle Annie," Flowerpot

scuffed, "but that won't fool the star packer none. Just because you're all duded up won't keep that deppity from bracin' us. And it won't help us shoot our way outa town when the time comes to hightail for the tules. I still think—"

"You ain't had a thought since the day you swore to hang yourself in that Mexican jail six months ago come hog-killing time," Long Jim declared, climbed into saddle. "Let's go get a pair of steaks and double rations of kitchen-cooked spuds."

The partners rode slowly along Main Street. They passed Mitchell's Mercantile, where two grim-faced citizens peered suspiciously from the doorway, and the Wells Fargo office, in the entrance of which Joe Creel, the agent, stood with a sawed-off shotgun cradled across his arm.

"Folks seem to be expectin' somebody," Long Jim reflected. "Couldn't be us, 'cause we sent no word we was coming."

Flowerpot Pratt sniffed the air. "Let's hit a shuck for the brush whilest we still got a chance," he suggested worriedly. "Shotguns and crowbars ain't my idea of welcome signs, none at all!"

"It ain't us they're waitin' for." Long Jim rode on to the jail and nodded at a bulletin board on its front wall. "Look at all them help wanted signs," he said. "Must be a shortage of cowhands hereabouts."

"Cowhands my eye!" Flowerpot protested. "Them's wanted circulars!"

But Long Jim ignored him, and riding close to the sidewalk, leaned over in saddle so he could scrutinize the text of a poster. "Wanted for house-breaking," he read aloud, then, turning to Flowerpot he asked, "You had any experience breaking houses?"

Pratt shook his head and proclaimed protestingly, "Dadnat it, Jim—let's light out."

Long Jim didn't seem to hear Flowerpot. He studied the posters again. "Here's one that says: Wanted Dead or Alive. What use would a dead man be to anyone, 'cept maybe to haunt a house. Would be a nice chore for you, friend Flowerpot. Easy work and free lodgin'."

A tall, serious-faced young man stepped from the stoop of the Cattlemen's Trust & Deposit and came warily along the sidewalk with a Winchester held at a present-arms position in front of him.

Flowerpot sighed. "I knowed it," he whispered. "I just knowed it!"

The man with the Winchester halted five paces in front of Long Jim and demanded, "Who are you, and what's your business here?"

Long Jim glanced at the star on the young man's vest.

"Are you the sheriff?"

"Deputy," the man said. "Name of Brett Swanson."

Long Jim grinned, dismounted and offered to shake hands. "Name's James, no relation to Jesse," he explained.

The deputy refused to shake hands. He held fast to his rifle and asked, "Who's that behind you?"

Long Jim glanced at Flowerpot. "That's my bedroll," he said soberly. "I got caught in a flash flood last night and didn't make up my bed this morning. Figured it would dry out faster, sort of flopping around loose on the horse that way."

Swanson's eyes went squinty. He peered at Flowerpot, then at Long Jim and demanded, "Are you daft?"

Long Jim shrugged and, glimpsing the blond girl at Mulqueen's Livery across the street, suddenly inquired, "Why did the lady there practically founder a fifty-dollar horse getting to town, sheriff?"

Swanson said frowningly. "She brought word that the Tombstone stage is stuck at Crazy Creek Crossing. A flash flood. Two lead mules and one swing mule drowned and the stage is stuck hub-deep in the mud."

"Most unfortunate," Long Jim sympathized. "Why don't you send out some teams?"

"A man can't do more'n one thing at a time," Deputy Swanson declared defensively. "Cleo—Miss Packard also brought word that two bank robbers were on their way to town. We couldn't give mind to harnessing six horses while defending our bank."

Long Jim smiled. He removed his Triple-X Stetson and looked directly at Cleo Packard. "Ma'am, did you actually mistake me for a bandit?" he called politely.

The girl blushed. "I—well, I didn't really have time to see you," she explained. "All I saw was the man with you; he looked so—"

"Pestilential, ma'am?" Lane's voice took on a sentimental tone. "I don't blame you in the least," he assured her. "We all make mistakes at times." He glanced affectionately at Flowerpot. "I myself was deceived by Mister Jugg's untidy appearance when I first met him. He's a devout disciple of the distinguished brotherhood known as the Unwashed Warriors of the World—an outfit dissolved by Lee's lost rebellion. Mister Jugg is seeking a secret formula known only to the high lamas of ancient Tibet." He smiled benignly.

The young sheriff stood bug-eyed, and Cleo Packard called, "Hadn't you better organize a rescue party, Brett? It'll soon be dark."

"Reckon so," Swanson said. He gave Long Jim a final scrutiny and asked, "Are you two going on west?"

"Soon as we eat," Long Jim assured him.

That seemed to satisfy Swanson, who now

gave orders to have the teams harnessed at once, and called for volunteers to ride with the rescue wagon.

WHEN the two partners had stabled their horses and were walking toward the Oriental Cafe, Flowerpot nudged Lane's arm and said nervously, "Look at them two gaboots over there at the bulletin board."

Long Jim peered at the Wells Fargo agent and the brawny blacksmith who were intently studying the wanted circulars. "I didn't have time to see if ours was there," he admitted.

"If them snoopers find it now we'll be caught betwixt two sets of guns," Flowerpot whispered apprehensively. "We'd be gone geeses."

"Gone geese," Lane corrected.

The teams were hitched, ready to go. Deputy Swanson called to the two men at the jail, "Creel, you and Brant keep an eye on things until we get back. It may be late."

The Wells Fargo agent patted his sawed-off shotgun. "This'll take care of any trouble," he bragged.

Long Jim and Flowerpot watched the six-horse hitch go by; then they went into the Oriental Cafe where Cleo Packard was putting on an apron.

Long Jim said, surprised, "Seems I heard talk on the trail, back a ways, that the Packards run the bank in Tailholt."

The girl sighed. "My brother," she said. "The bank's been robbed twice. He insists on making good every dollar that was stolen, and I'm helping him do it by working here."

"An' that's right honorable, ma'am," Long Jim said. "Maybe what you need around here, though, is a new deputy sheriff."

Cleo frowned. "That's what people are saying," she admitted. "But it's really not Brett's fault. He's done everything Sheriff Bradley could've done if he'd been here. Why, Brett is even donating half his salary to the bank, helping make up the depositors' loss. And today, when the stage was overdue, he asked me to ride out and investigate, so he wouldn't be absent in case there was another bank holdup."

Long Jim glanced at the diamond ring on Cleo's finger. "Did the handsome young star packer give you that?"

Cleo blushed, and nodded. "But we can't get married until the bank loss is made up," she explained.

"A very sad state—"

Long Jim's sympathy was interrupted by a voice ordering, "H'ist your hands, you two owlhoot hellions!"

"What for?" Flowerpot Pratt croaked.

And Long Jim asked, "Is this some sort of joke?"

"It's a joke, all right," the man at the door snapped, scattergun aimed, while another came

into the room and took the partners' guns. "But the joke is on our careless deputy who lets wanted criminals run loose in our midst."

"What do you mean?" Cleo Packard demanded.

Without taking his eyes off the partners, the man at the door said, "Show her the circular we found on the sheriff's bulletin board, Sid. It's got a full description of this pair, saying they're wanted in connection with the Lincoln County War."

"And they're the ones that's been robbin' our bank," Sid declared.

Long Jim turned to Cleo. "These men are making a most stupid mistake, ma'am," he assured her. "Would you be kind enough to serve us a steak supper while we discuss the matter more fully?"

Creel snorted. "It don't call for no discussion," he muttered. "Your supper'll be served in jail."

Flowerpot Pratt just scowled accusingly at Long Jim as the latter stood up.

THE jail was a single large cell separated from the sheriff's office by a wall and narrow passageway. One rear window, without glass and heavily barred, afforded the only illumination, which at this hour was moonlight.

"Ain't much of a place," Long Jim commented, appraising the blanketless strap-iron bunks and dreary stone walls.

Flowerpot Pratt slumped on a bunk and said dismally. "I knowed dang well that your habit of eatin' so high on the hog would git us behind bars. This is one tight you can't jaw-bone us out of, by grab. We're gone geeses. I mean geeses."

Even Long Jim seemed slightly crestfallen. "It is kinda a shame we should've been nabbed within sight and smell of a real square meal," he reflected.

"You and your talk about food," Flowerpot scoffed. "Well, we still ain't et, and we won't, before tomorrow mornin'."

Long Jim groaned.

But presently, as Cleo Packard pushed a tray of food through the slot in the cell door, Lane greeted her with all the cheerfulness of a man about to relish a meal at his own table.

"T-bone steaks," he murmured. "An' coffee brewed by a beautiful blonde goddess!"

"I'm sorry you had to wait so long," Cleo said, "but Mr. Creel—that's the man who brought you here—was supposed to tote the tray. He never came for it."

"This is much nicer," Long Jim declared. Then, as he carved himself a mouthful of juicy steak, he asked, "Hasn't anyone seen them bandits who robbed your brother's bank?"

Cleo nodded. "Brother Fred says one of them is tall, and the other short. They wore bandanna masks, but Fred says the short one

has a beard. That's why I thought you two might be the bandits, on account of Mister Jugg's beard."

"Sheer coincidence," Long Jim said between mouthfuls of food.

Later, when Cleo had gone, he exclaimed, "I've got a hunch, friend Flowerpot—a happy hunch!"

Flowerpot snorted, but he watched intently as Long Jim went to the rear window and tested the bars. "What's your hunch?" Pratt asked.

"Less'n I'm mistaken we'll be out of here soon," Long Jim said.

Flowerpot hurried to the window. "You found a loose bar?" he asked eagerly.

"No," Long Jim said. "I'm thinking of another kind of bar."

"You mean that Mex saloon acrost the Border where they got so mad when we paid off with a Dixie dollar bill?"

Long Jim shook his head. He went back to a bunk and sat there with a thoughtful frown on his moonlit face while Flowerpot watched him worriedly. There were times when Pratt feared for the sanity of his bombastic companion; times like this, when Long Jim seemed to conjur' with the spirits. It made him feel downright spooky.

Finally there came a commotion at the window—a rasp of metal against metal, and the gusty grunt of a man exerting great strength.

Flowerpot swore softly, staring bug-eyed at a dim shape outlined behind the bars.

Long Jim didn't seem surprised as the mysterious man pried two bars apart and called softly, "Your horses are out here. Ride off while you've got a chance."

Then the dark shape disappeared, and Flowerpot exclaimed, "Who was that?"

"The man I was thinking about," Long Jim said casually, and examined the opening. "Looks like it'll be too tight a fit for you, friend Flowerpot."

"Dadrat it!" Flowerpot protested, seeing at once that Lane was correct. It even seemed doubtful if Long Jim could squeeze through so small an opening.

But Lane made it, with some difficulty, whereupon Flowerpot demanded, "You ain't goin' to leave me here alone, be you Jim?"

There was no answer—and no sight of Jim. "Why—the dirty son!" Flowerpot muttered dazedly. "Didn't even say good-by!"

Anguish slogged through Flowerpot Pratt, and with it came the awful sense of being alone. Until this moment he hadn't realized what having a pardner meant to him; hadn't understood exactly why he'd stuck with Long Jim Lane through thick and thin, despite Jim's hightoned talk and fancy habits. But now he knew. It was because he had always been lonely, until he met Jim. Even way back,

when he was a kid in the orphanage, he'd been lonely. There were plenty of other kids in that place, but he had never known a real pal until he met Long Jim Lane. And now Long Jim was gone.

FLOWERPOT was utterly dejected when he heard footsteps in the sheriff's office. That, he thought, meant Deputy Swanson had returned.

"He'll probably bend a gun barrel over my noggin when he finds out Jim is gone," Pratt reflected morosely.

Then, as a shadowy form appeared at the cell door and a key rattled in the lock, Pratt heard Jim Lane whisper, "Come on, friend Flowerpot—we got chores to do."

Almost at once Jim was handing Flowerpot a gun and saying, "The deputy hasn't returned, and the bank is about to be robbed."

"By us?" Flowerpot asked protestingly, but Long Jim was already cat-footing down the corridor.

Pratt followed him out to the street where their horses were tied to a hitch-rail. "Let's git on 'em and skedaddle," Pratt pleaded.

"Follow me," Jim ordered.

For a fleeting moment Flowerpot considered desertion. This, he told himself, was too much—asking a man to rob a bank within a minute of getting out of jail. Flowerpot glanced at his horse, sorely tempted to mount and hightail for the tules. But even though convinced that Long Jim was demented, Flowerpot couldn't quite bring himself to leave him.

He was on the verge of making one final protest, when Cleo Packard stepped from the shadows and said urgently, "Please hurry, Mister James. I heard them pry the lock off the safe!"

Flowerpot grasped Jim's arm. "Does she mean somebody else is robbin' the bank?"

Jim nodded.

"Good!" Flowerpot exclaimed. "Then there ain't no use us doin' it. Let's leave."

"No," Lane said. "We're going to save the bank."

"What for?" Flowerpot demanded. "We ain't got no money in it!"

But Long Jim was going into the doorway and didn't seem to hear him.

The rest of it was so sudden that Flowerpot scarcely knew what was going on. Jim opened the door, and as Flowerpot's eyes focused to the glow of a single lamp, he saw two masked, dark-robed men stuffing money into a sack while another man sat gagged and bound in a chair.

Then Long Jim shouted, "Hoist your biscuit hooks!" and the bandits raised their hands, whereupon Cleo Packard rushed to release her brother.

(Continued on page 130)

Answers To CATTLE COUNTRY QUIZ

(Questions on page 97)



1. If the ranch boss sent you out after a "wrangatang," you would, if you knew your business, return with one of the day wranglers. The term is used in various parts of the West in reference to this type of worker.

2. In the language of the Westerner, a "work horse" is a horse which is used in the harness. Thus, a "riding horse" is not a work horse, no matter how hard it actually may be worked on the range.

3. True. A horse, ridden by a long-legged rider, may sometimes be jokingly referred to as a "walking stick."

4. The slang expression, "visiting harness," is used by the cowpuncher in reference to his "Sunday clothes."

5. False. "Tarantula juice" is a slang name for whiskey.

6. According to the cowman's way of thinking, "talking horse" simply means talking about the favorite of all subjects—horses. Needless to mention, it does not refer to horses which talk!

7. To the old time Westerner, "state's eggs" meant eggs shipped from the Eastern states to the territories of the West.

8. False. A "steer horse" is a roping horse educated to take up slack by pulling away from a thrown animal.

9. False. "Skookum" means "good," "great," or "fine."

10. A "single roll" is the act of whirling a gun forward on the trigger finger, and cock-

ing and releasing the hammer as it passes beneath the fleshy part of the thumb.

11. If a cowpuncher friend told you he was going to look up a "sharpshooter," you would, if you knew your West, know that he was seeking a type of cattle buyer—an individual who buys up small lots of cattle and tries to sell them at a profit.

12. In old time Western slang, "shakedown" meant "bed."

13. True. A "parrot-bill" is a type of pistol.

14. If you heard a friend of yours had been "paunched," you should be either alarmed or angry. "Paunched" means shot in the stomach.

15. A Westerner would do a "mid-air dance" if he were hanged.

16. Surprisingly enough, the man on a Western ranch who is called a "miller" actually has nothing to do with grain or flour. Rather, he is the individual about the place whose duty it is to keep the windmills in good repair.

17. A "John Henry" is a signature. "John Law" is any lawman, such as sheriff, etc. A "Johnny-come-lately" is a newcomer, tenderfoot or greenhorn.

18. False. "Jingling" is a term applied to the rounding up of the horse herd.

19. When a person is said to have been "raised on sour milk," he either has a mean disposition or a sour look.

20. A rannyhan is a top-hand cow puncher.



He was garbed in a flour sack, linen duster and gray socks. . . .

THE WEST'S STRANGEST OUTLAW

"Here I lay me down to sleep to wait the coming morrow, Perhaps success, perhaps defeat—and everlasting sorrow. . . ."
But the West's strangest outlaw was only partly right about the last part—there was no maybe about it!

By

O. A. ENGSTROM

NO ONE paid much attention to Charles E. Bolton until that bright August morning in 1877—the day he made his first mistake.

Three times during the previous year Bolton had held up Wells Fargo stages in California and each time had disappeared completely with sizable booty. He went unnoticed except for the odd dress he wore on these forays—surely the most bizarre ever donned by any road agent. The unfortunate drivers described their assailant as wearing a long white linen duster, a flour sack with two slits over his head and a pair of gray socks pulled high over his boots. It was noted also that he wore

a derby hat but whether it was perched idiotically atop the mask or concealed beneath it was never clearly brought out.

On this August morning the Point Arenas to Duncan's Mills stage rattled laboriously over the low foothills bordering the Russian River. As the driver slowed down for a sharp turn the flour sack phantom leaped from the brush, crouched below the lead horses, and pointed a double-barreled shotgun at his chest.

"All right, throw down that box!" roared the figure in a stentorian voice. The driver complied and eagerly left the scene as soon as the bandit permitted him.

Next day a small posse pulled up to the scene. The men found the battered express box with its contents gone—\$300 in cash and a check made out to the Granger National Bank of San Francisco. The mail bag had been slit along the side near the top in the form of a T and letters and parcels were strewn about. No other clues except. . . . From a nearby bush one of the men picked a waybill.

"Look here boys, listen to this!" he said as he read the inscription:

*I've labored long and hard for bread,
For honor and for riches,
But on my corns too long you've tread
You fine-haired sons . . .*

Black Bart, The PO8

The men chuckled inwardly. "Well," said one, "it's something to go on anyway." Face-tious though it might be, this bit of doggerel was the first tangible clue that had turned up—and it was Bolton's first mistake. Other bandits could wear flour sacks and dusters, they could ape his movements and cut T's in the mail bags. But how many could write poetry? As new holdups were reported, Mother Lode newspapers reprinted the quatrain, sardonically asking authorities for more poetry. But none was found. That is, not until. . . .

In the summer of 1878, a lone bandit stopped the Quincy-Oroville stage, just a mile from Berry Creek. He was garbed in the usual flour sack, linen duster and long gray socks. Again he selected a sharp turn, again roared the now-familiar command, "Throw down that box!" to which the driver readily yielded.

This time the box held \$379 in coin, a \$200 diamond ring and a watch worth about \$25. After rifling the mail sack the highwayman couched himself behind a boulder and penciled the following lines:

*Here I lay me down to sleep
To wait the coming morrow,
Perhaps success, perhaps defeat,
And everlasting sorrow.*

*Let come what will I'll try it on,
My condition can't be worse;
And if there's money in that box
'Tis money in my purse!*

As usual the author made the verse authentic with his signature. "Black Bart. The PO8." If Bart sought notoriety he got it. Wells Fargo thought nighy of his talents and posted a reward of \$300 for his capture. Postal authorities tacked on another \$200. Governor Irwin matched this sum in the name of the people of California. Before many months had passed the original \$800 had grown to a staggering \$18,000—perhaps the largest sum ever offered for a poet dead or alive.

INSTEAD of restraining the ambitious Bart, the reward offers had quite the opposite effect. Within a week he held up the Laporte-Oroville stage, but the booty proved to be the smallest yet—\$50 and a silver watch. On successive days in October he popped up on the Ukiah line and relieved express company boxes of \$500. No poetry was found but the drivers swore it was Black Bart again.

As one stage pulled to an abrupt stop a woman passenger screamed and tossed her purse out the coach window. The bandit threw it back, and with a deep bow assured her, "Madam, I never rob passengers, especially the ladies. I am interested only in Wells Fargo's treasure boxes!" He slapped the horses and quickly darted into the brush himself. After emptying the chest he doffed his comical makeup, rolled it into a heavy piece of canvas and made off on foot.

A posse ranged for sixty miles over the countryside, at times as close as a city block from its quarry. Bart darted in and out of the brush like a hunted fox. He knew the terrain well—the heavy boulders over the next ridge, the dense underbrush in a nearby ravine. He had marked them well during frequent visits in past years. Reluctantly the posse abandoned the search.

It was here that James B. Hume, the quiet, ministerial-looking Chief Investigator for Wells Fargo, took over. Until this moment Hume had viewed Bart as little more than a pesky young fellow with a penchant for outlandish dress. Hume and his staff had earned an enviable reputation for apprehending highwaymen. He sent his agents to the scene of the last holdup with instructions to leave no stone unturned, to inspect every clue no matter how innocent-appearing. From an isolated ranch house on the Eel River, deep in the redwood country came word that a "gentleman tourist" had recently stopped for lunch. Mrs. McCreary, the owner, would be happy to tell Mr. Hume all she knew.

But the detective became more interested in

16-year-old Mary McCreary's story than in her mother's.

"Mary," Hume began, "can you tell me something about the gentleman who stopped here for lunch the other day?"

"Well, he was very nice," Mary said thoughtfully. "He looked like a preacher but he joked a lot and didn't talk like one."

"What did he look like?"

"He had blue eyes, kind of heavy eyebrows, and brown hair that was getting gray around here," she said pointing to her temples.

"What else?" persisted Hume, as he noted the girl's remarks in the small worn notebook.

"Two of his lower teeth were gone," she said, again pointing, "and I noticed his hands were nice and smooth."

"Not the hands of a person used to hard work?" Hume wanted to know. She shook her head negatively before Hume had finished his question.

"What about his clothes?"

"He wore a dark coat that was ripped on this sleeve—" holding her left arm forward slightly—"and it was sewn with white thread. And his boots were cut over the toes. I guess so's he could walk easier."

Upon further questioning Mary brought out that the tourist's watch chain was broken and held together with a small strip of leather, that the man neither drank nor smoked, but had had several cups of coffee.

Hume thanked the McCreary's and left. To the detective Black Bart had now become more than a challenge. He had specimens of the fellow's handwriting. He knew him to be quite intelligent, well read and cunning. But where would he strike next?

During the ensuing months Hume built up a bulky dossier of clues. A rancher in Shasta County revealed that a man answering Bart's description had stopped for breakfast, a shopkeeper near Redding sold an axe and some crackers to a man who looked like Bart. From valuable bits of information Hume now issued his famous confidential circular on Black Bart, which read in part,

He is a person of great endurance, a thorough mountaineer, and a remarkable walker, and claims that he cannot be excelled in making quick transits over the mountains and grades; when reading without glasses, holds paper off at arms' length; is comparatively well-educated, a general reader, and is well informed on current topics; cool, self-contained, a sententious talker with waggish tendencies. . . .

Meanwhile the road agent terrorized the entire region of the northern mines. One day he'd stop a coach on the American River, next day he was reported 60 miles south. More than a dozen robberies in the next three years,

with losses totaling more than \$25,000, were directly attributed to Bart.

Across the state, he had assumed the proportions of a legend. He was described as a romantic, handsome, rugged will-o'-the-wisp who simply was too clever to be apprehended. He never fired a shot, merely struck terror into the hearts of Wells Fargo men with his growl, "Throw down that box!" He was a romantic soul—he never touched the ladies nor robbed a single passenger. He was witty and smart—how about those poems? Newspapers clamored for action—but hoped Bart would not be caught—not just yet. He made good copy.

He was not without his imitators. There were other flour sacks and linen dusters—even another whimsical poem. It was left at the scene of a robbery down south, attached to a bush, much as Bart would have done. And it read,

*Blame me not for what I've done,
I don't deserve your curses;
And if for some cause I must be hung
Let it be for my verses.*

To Hume and his men the verse did not ring true. Moreover, it was found in a region never frequented by Bart.

ON A BRISK cloudy day in November, 1883, Charles E. Bolton strolled along Kearney Street in San Francisco on his way to lunch. He was a man of middle age, with sparkling blue eyes and laugh lines crinkling the corners. His handsome gray moustache and fine imperial counterbalanced his rather high cheekbones. He carried his medium height straight as a gymnast. He was impeccably dressed, with a natty bowler crowning a shock of silvery brown hair, and in his right hand he swung a fine silver-knobbed bamboo cane.

Altogether Mr. Bolton gave the appearance of a genteel man-about-town. Any pedestrian would have guessed that this distinguished-looking gentleman had a downtown office with his name on the door, enjoyed excellent credit and business reputation, and belonged to exclusive clubs. All of which he did.

Mr. Bolton quickened his gait as he approached the door of the New York Bakery, removed his hat before the door closed behind him. Seated at a corner table in this favored lunchroom were five men—all members of the San Francisco Police Department. He greeted them warmly, exchanged a few pleasantries about the weather, and sat down.

"Glad to see you again, Charlie," smiled Captain Stone. "Been out of town?"

"Yes, had some business over in Nevada," Bolton remarked as he picked up the menu,

"My mine, you know. I've been back quite a while, just haven't had time to get over this way."

"Business must be good, Charlie," chided Stone.

"Yes it is—very good!" replied Mr. Bolton. "You fellows took up the wrong calling when you went to work for the City of San Francisco. Here you sit, when you could be out making some real money."

"What do you mean, Charlie?" asked one of the men.

"Well, for one thing I hear they've raised the reward on Black Bart to more than fifteen thousand dollars," he beamed as he eyed each man. "Now if you fellows were ambitious—"

"Bartholomew is not for us," smiled Captain Stone as he rose to leave with the other men. "He's Wells Fargo's headache. Of course, if he fell into our laps—"

LESS than a week later a stage coach rumbled slowly up Funck Hill between Milton and Sonora. Next to driver Reason McConnell sat 19-year old Jimmy Roller with a small caliber rifle across his lap. As the coach slowed to snail's pace going up-grade, Jimmy leaped into the brush to chase a squirrel. Driver McConnell urged his horses along to the next turn when a hooded figure suddenly leaped to the lead horses. There was no command to throw down the box this time, for Bart knew that Wells Fargo was now bolting the treasure chests to the floors of the coaches in an effort to frustrate highwaymen.

"Get down!" roared Bart. "Unhitch those horses and walk to the crest of the grade. Stand where I can see you!"

Bart hopped aboard the coach and went to work smashing open the chest with a small hand axe. It was some time before he reached in and lifted out \$4,000 in rough amalgam and \$500 in coin. It was the best haul of his eight-year career. Twenty-seven previous boxes had yielded around \$40,000.

Jimmy Roller, attracted by the hammering,

rushed to the top of a knoll four hundred yards from McConnell's vantage point. Quickly the boy sensed the situation, leveled his rifle at the hooded phantom and fired. Again he fired. "I got him!" shouted the youth as he made his way down the hill. The driver joined the boy at the scene, only to find the bandit had vanished completely. A blood smear on a nearby tree trunk substantiated young Roller's marksmanship.

Calaveras County Sheriff Ben Thorne and his posse reached the scene early that afternoon. Amazed by the profusion of evidence, Thorne and his men found two pairs of detachable cuffs, an old derby hat, a pair of overalls and a handkerchief. Further search uncovered two used flour sacks imprinted with Sperry & Co. labels, and an empty field glass case.

Thorne's eyes were fixed to the handkerchief, for in one corner he made out the hieroglyphics, F.X.O.-7.

In San Francisco Hume was delighted with the sheriff's bundle of evidence. He thanked Thorne warmly and turned the marked handkerchief over to special investigator Harry N. Morse. Morse had been hired by Wells Fargo to work solely on the Black Bart case. "See what you can do with that, Harry!" Hume instructed the noted sleuth.

Deputy Morse was a thorough man. He had just cracked the notorious Dupont Street frauds case and, with Hume, enjoyed a reputation as one of the most relentless man-hunters in the West. Here before him, he realized, he had as dogged a job as anyone could assign him. That square piece of cloth meant that he must cover every laundry—ninety-one in all—in the city of San Francisco. Even then he might fail to lay open the secret of the cryptic F.X.O.-7.

Meanwhile Hume dispatched agents to San Andreas to question Roller and McConnell. Young Jimmy testified that a man answering Bart's description had visited his mother's inn a few days prior to the holdup. Jimmy

DEAD MEN LIVE LONGER



With his dead man's face and his dead man's name he was safe at last from his pursuers' guns. And yet, because hatred for bushwhack murder lay deep in his secret soul, Dusty Rhodes tossed a sure-fire winner's hand into the discard, to play out, instead, the busted flush of a hated, hunted killer!

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had studied the fellow well because of his singular request—he had asked for a key to his room. In the mining regions this simply was not done, and most hotels had no keys to any of their rooms. Testimony of shopkeepers in the town tallied with known facts on Bart.

It took investigator Morse just one week to unfold the mystery of the marked handkerchief. He traced it to Thomas Ware's laundry on Bush Street between Kearny and Montgomery. Ware quickly rifled through his files, then turned to the detective,

"That handkerchief belongs to C. E. Bolton. He's a friend of mine. Comes in a couple of times a week when he's in town. May even be in today. Care to wait?"

"No thanks. Do you happen to know where he lives?" asked Morse, reluctant to show his hand just yet.

"Say, what do you want to see him about?" asked Ware suspiciously.

"I'm a mining man," answered the detective. "I have some samples of ore I brought in from the back country. I'd like to have Bolton look them over for me."

"Oh, I see. Well, he lives at the Webb House on Second Street."

Morse thanked the proprietor and went immediately to the Webb House. No, the landlady was sorry, but Mr. Bolton wasn't in. Through a mild cross-examination, Morse learned that Bolton neither drank nor smoked, that he eschewed profanity and was extremely polite. He was a gentleman of the first rank.

NEXT day Morse returned to Ware's establishment. He would lay his cards on the table and solicit Ware's aid in apprehending the elusive Bolton. "May I speak to you privately?" he asked the laundryman. As Ware strolled over to bolt the door, he turned quickly to the detective.

"Here comes Bolton now!" he exclaimed.

Morse looked out to see a medium-sized, erect, immaculately dressed figure approaching. That was his man! He was positive of it. Ware introduced the two men, and as Morse explained his business they walked into Bush Street. Morse continued a machine gun conversation as he led the unwary Bolton straight into Wells Fargo offices to the door marked JAMES B. HUME.

The three men conversed quietly for half an hour, parrying words and phrases. Finally Hume turned to Bolton.

"Why are you wearing that bandage on your hand?"

"I injured it leaping from a train in Nevada!" snapped Bart indignantly. "I fail to see what business it is of yours, sir!"

"Are you sure it isn't a bullet wound you received while holding up a stage in Calaveras county?"

"Gentlemen!" stormed Bart, "are you inferring that I am a common thief! You most certainly have the wrong man. I can account for every minute of my time for the past month!"

"Is this your handkerchief?" asked Hume, tossing the piece of cloth across his desk.

"I am positive it is not!" exclaimed Bart rising from his chair. "If that is all, gentlemen, I shall be on my way."

"Just a moment," said Morse, "we'll go along."

The trio walked the short distance to the Webb House. While Bolton watched, the two detectives hastily searched drawers, valises and trunks. From a dresser drawer Morse pulled out a dozen handkerchiefs. Each bore the mark, F.X.O.-7. The bandit stoutly pleaded his innocence. "Tomorrow we'll go down to Calaveras county and see how many people can identify you," said Hume. As far as he was concerned the case was closed.

During the eight year chase Hume had spent many anxious hours tussling with the man who was now his prisoner. Twenty-eight times Black Bart had robbed stages, twenty-seven times he had escaped cleanly. Ironically enough, Bart committed his last hold-up at the precise scene of the first back in 1875. Half apologetically, some newspapers announced Bart's capture. After all, he hadn't killed anyone—he never carried a loaded gun! Though he was the mildest-mannered, gentlest bandit who ever held up a stage, the fact remained that he was the West's most notorious enemy of law and order.

Down in Calaveras County the populace turned out as if for a conquering hero. But the evidence against Bart was so overwhelming that he was sentenced to San Quentin prison. Considering the magnitude of his crimes the six-year sentence he received was light indeed. Strangely enough, the U. S. Postal Service never prosecuted him after his release from prison.

During his incarceration other Barts attempted to cash in on his fame and reputation. This made the celebrated bandit angry. He wanted a clean slate when he was set free. On the day of his release reporters crowded the gates for statements. He answered the men in the same casual manner in which he held up stages.

Finally one newsman asked about Bart's plans for the future.

"I simply don't know, gentlemen!" he answered wearily.

"Think you might take up writing poetry for a living?" the reporter persisted.

Charles E. Bolton eyed the fellow squarely and replied,

"Young man! Didn't you hear me say I would commit no more crimes!"

By
**DAVID
CREWE**



Old Tom smiled thinly.
"There's enough dynamite here to blow the whole dam clean to Hades..."

SADDLE TRAMP

The time had come when Old Tom's hungry guns were sated and would no longer feed him —it was time then, he knew, for him to go gunning for his glory!

OLD TOM WALLACE touched a match to the dry, brittle limbs of dead mesquite and settled back on his haunches, waiting for the flame to warm the beans and coffee. The fire drove back the darkness and cast weird shadows over the tiny camp. Old Tom sighed and moved closer to the warmth. The flames revealed the bitter lines of his grizzled, sun-cured face; lines that reflected his thoughts this night.

He'd been in the saddle a long time this day; too long for a man with sixty-three winters behind him. His thin, gaunt old body

ached with a thousand pains and his bad knee was getting stiff again. He'd tried to hide these signs of old age when he'd ridden up to Gib Scaling's big Circle S spread and asked for work this afternoon. He'd even touched Blue Boy with the spurs and made him buck a little just to show he could still sit a saddle. But he hadn't fooled Gib Scaling.

Gib had grunted, "I ain't running an old folks home. Besides, I ain't hiring nothin' but fightin' men now, with them nesters moving in and throwing up a dam across the river."

Old Tom hadn't meant to argue the matter. He didn't like Gib Scaling anyway and wouldn't have asked for a job at all if he wasn't near desperate for work. He'd intended to wheel Blue Boy around and ride off without a word. He would have done it if Sam Lewk, Scaling's new gunfighting foreman, hadn't laughed.

Lewk, lean and hawk-faced, hooked his thumbs in his gunbelt and laughed contemptuously. "When a gent gets so old and wore out he has to ride the grubline he oughta' sell his saddle and buy himself a plow," he jeered. "Maybe them nesters could use yuh, Old Tom. They're gonna need help, and bad, right soon. Reckon they'd hire almost anybody."

Those words had cut deep under the oldster's tough hide. Partly because he'd been a cowman most of his life and the cowman's impersonal contempt for the sodbuster had been bred into him. But mostly because he'd already seen the nesters about work and had been turned down. They were finishing up the dam right now and he was too old for that kind of work, they said. Maybe when spring plowing started they could use him. Old Tom had rode off cussing. Bad enough that he stooped to asking a sodbuster for a job. Worse still that he'd been turned down.

"Lewk," Old Tom had said coldly, "there never was a day I wasn't a better man than you and I stand here ready to prove it."

For a moment it looked like Lewk was going to draw. The gunman's eyes turned bleak as a prairie blizzard and his lips tightened in a thin, ugly line. Then he laughed again, harshly, and cut Blue Boy across the rump with his heavy quirt. The horse had squealed and whirled around leaving the ranchyard on a dead run, with Old Tom clawing leather to keep his seat.

Now as he stared glumly into the campfire, he realized he was beaten. This was a young man's country and the man was wise that accepted that fact and turned to some other trade before he passed his prime. But Old Tom had no other trade.

HE MIGHT have done as he did last winter. Spend his last dollar for flour and beans and take to the mountains. A man could hole up there and maybe prospect a little to keep the monotony from driving him mad. Come spring there was always an off chance of some outfit being shy a round-up cook or tally man. But Old Tom couldn't do that this winter.

It was last week he'd received the letter from his daughter, Marie. She and the baby were coming to spend the winter with him. Her husband had been killed in an accident at the steel mill. Marie hadn't said so in the

letter, but Old Tom knew that Marie probably had no money. George, her husband, hadn't made much at the mills and it cost to live in a city. So she and the baby were coming to spend the winter with him and he didn't even have a place to spend the winter himself.

Marie didn't know how it was with him of course. She thought he had a little house and enough income from a mine he'd discovered to keep him up in fair style. He'd told her that last year in a letter when she had written him to come to Pennsylvania and live with them.

Old Tom was just taking the coffee off the fire when he heard the jingle of a bridle chain and whirled around to face the rider staring down at him. The rider was Sam Lewk.

Lewk grinned and swung easily out of the saddle. He stepped up to the fire and spread his palms to the heat, then sat down and helped himself to Old Tom's beans and coffee. "I got news for yuh, Old Tom," the gunman said between bites. "Gib Scaling changed his mind about givin' yuh a job."

For a moment Old Tom froze. He looked at Lewk blankly and his jaw sagged. Then he grinned. "There's a lot of work in my old carcass yet. Gib oughta know that an oldster who knows his work can get more done than a green young feller."

Lewk nodded, studying the old man through veiled lids. "That's kinda' the way he figured it, Old Tom. None of us regular hands have had any experience in dynamiting."

"Dynamiting?" Old Tom looked at Lewk puzzledly; then the smile faded from his lips and his face grew hard. "Maybe you better tell me just a mite more about this job, friend."

Lewk smiled coldly. "Why, it's like Gib was telling you, Old Tom. These nesters is swarming all over the place. Gib aims to get rid of them before they get a toehold. Right now they got all their money and their plans tied up in that dam they built. It's supposed to start filling by sunup tomorrow. Gib was just thinking it would sure cramp their style if something happened to that dam tonight."

Old Tom's eyes gleamed with hot anger. "That's the job I'm offered, eh, Lewk? Gib figures I done a little dynamiting whilst I was prospecting. Figures I'd be glad to wipe out twenty families for a few of his stinking dollars."

The gunman smiled thinly. "It's worth five hundred to you. You can't afford to turn down that kind of money."

Old Tom stood up. "Get outta' my camp, you sneakin' varmint, and tell Gib I'd see him in hell before I'd take a dime of his money. Tell him too that I'm ridin' down to them nesters and tellin' them about this."

The gunman's hand moved slightly and Old Tom caught the gleam of light on metal as the man's gun swung up. "All right, get on down to the river, old man. You'll dynamite that dam all right or find yourself buzzard bait afore mornin'."

Old Tom looked at the cold, twisted grin on the man's lips, saw the killer lust in the man's pale eyes, then turned and threw the saddle on his blue roan horse. He might have known Gib Scaling would not have offered him a decent job. Gib had no room for broken down saddle tramps.

Old Tom swung stiffly into the saddle. "Yore crazy to try it, Lewk," he said tightly. "I don't see how yuh figure to keep them nesters from seein' you if you go sneaking around that dam. I was down there last night and they were all camped right on it."

"Shut up," the gunman snapped. "We'll figure that out when we get down there. Lewk was nervous and had no liking for this job."

THEY came to the brush choked river bank and dismounted. "We'll ease down on foot," Lewk said uncertainly. "I don't want no slip-up."

Old Tom shrugged. "You'll get a slug in yore belly before you get within a hundred yards of that dam. Look." He pointed down the creek to where several campfires glowed redly. "They got sense enough to keep guards posted all along the creek."

Sam Lewk laughed harshly. "Yuh can't scare me off, old man. Gib says to blow up that dam and I ain't gonna be the one to say we couldn't do it. We'll sneak down the river and plant our dynamite against the dam. You can set a long fuse to give us time to get away afore it goes off. Them nesters will sleep right up to the time it explodes. They been working all day."

Old Tom had no particular love for the nesters but they were honest, hard working men and they had families. It would ruin them if they lost the dam at this stage of the game.

Old Tom shrugged. "Yore plan might work, but it's taking a chance. Me, I don't take chances if I can get out of it."

The gunman scowled. "Maybe you know a better way."

Old Tom nodded. "It would be safer to float the dynamite down on a raft. The current will carry it up to the dam and it'll hold there 'til it goes off. Fact is we could ride up to where Flint Creek runs into Saludo River and set the raft loose from there. That way we could ride up Flint Creek when we make our getaway. Won't leave no tracks to follow."

Old Tom heard the gunman suck in his breath.

Ten minutes later they dismounted again and Old Tom set about stringing the fuse to the dynamite and crimping on the percussion caps.

The gunman watched him, cat-eyed and suspicious. "One wrong move," he threatened, "just one wrong move and I'll plug yuh square in the belly."

Old Tom smiled thinly. "I'm doin' it just like I said, Lewk. There's enough dynamite here to blow that dam clean to Hades. It'll wipe out everything for fifty yards around when it pops."

He built a raft of river willows and tied the dynamite to it, then covered the top of the raft loosely with branches. "That's to keep 'em from seeing the spark of the fuse," he said, when Lewk grunted suspiciously. "That fuse will burn maybe fifteen minutes. That's plenty of time, seeing as how the current is moving pretty fast."

Old Tom watched while the gunman lit the fuse and eased the raft into the water. "We better get out of here now," Old Tom said uneasily. "We can get clean away afore that dynamite goes off."

The gunman shook his head. "We're stayin' right here, old man. If it so happens that dynamite don't go off I aim to bend this gun over yore ugly head."

Old Tom moved restlessly in the darkness. "You got a watch? You can time it. It'll go off in about fifteen minutes like I told you."

The gunman took a watch from his pocket and glanced at it under the flame of a match. "Ten o'clock now. At ten fifteen that dam will be moving toward the sky or you'll be breakfast for some coyote."

Minutes ticked by. Old Tom thought about Marie and the baby coming in on the stage. It would be a hard blow to Marie if she got here just in time for her father's funeral. He flexed his stiff joints. "One more minute," the gunman said.

Old Tom steeled himself, then jumped with all the spring left in his weary old legs. He fell face down in a shallow ravine and lay there, not daring to breathe. He heard Lewk swearing, saw the man peering at him through the darkness; then the ground seemed to jump straight up and the sky was filled with a weird yellow light. The roar of the dynamite deafened Old Tom, and hurled dust into his eyes, but not before he saw the gunman, Lewk, whisked away as if some giant invisible arm had plucked him from the ground.

Old Tom tried to get up. It was then he realized that a tree had fallen across the ravine, pinning his legs against the ground. He winced with pain and fell back.

(Continued on page 127)

A MAN FOR .45 RANGE



CHAPTER ONE

Bullet Buy

PERCHED atop the crooked post was a bleached human skull. Through the brow of it was a hole that could be only a bullet hole. A few inches below it was nailed a parched board. Burned into the board, perhaps with a running-iron, was the legend: NO TRESPASSING. ENTER AT YOUR OWN RISK. DUKE (.45) RANCH.

The rider with the pack horse who had come across the rutted table of slick rock reined in and studied this sign with a deep concentration. His lips moved over the words, and finally said, "Why, damn it now—" He was offended, and seemed to feel he had a right to be.

He shoved his hat back off his brow. The

**"You made this a six-gun range,
mister, so I'll trade you even—my
gun for your life!"**



The first shot was Kenyon's—the second Malone's. . . .

By

JOSEPH

CHADWICK

wind swirled golden dust about him. The blistering Utah sun was a weight on his back, but he was no longer sweating. He was sweated dry and, rolling a quirly cigarette, he found his tongue too cottony to moisten the paper. He let the wind take paper and tobacco. The sign again—he scowled at it, then reached for his rope, shook out the loop and dropped it over the offending signpost. He kned his mount into movement, the rope came taut, the post bent and

strained and snapped off close to the sun-baked earth.

This done, the rider smiled. It was a humorous smile on a gaunt face, stubbly with a week's growth. He removed his rope from the fallen signpost, methodically coiled it, replaced it on his saddle. He lifted his metallic gaze, eyes squinting against the sun-glare, and looked into the distances. There was nothing but brassy sky and measureless miles of sandrock.

"Dot Forty-Five Ranch, eh?" he muttered, and spat to show his contempt. The ranch's brand seemed to offend him as much as had the no-trespassing notice. He rode on, however, on into nowhere.

He traveled all the rest of that day through a tortuous maze of country, finding a water tank late in the afternoon, and then, at sundown, crossed a rocky ridge and saw the headquarters of the ranch. He rode past miles of hayfields, red soil watered by a ruddy brown stream. The dry desert smell was gone, here in this oasis. He breathed more deeply. His horses quickened their gait. He saw no sign of cattle, and so looked bewildered.

In the purplish dusk, he found the ranch buildings close to the red wall of the canyon. Barns, bunkhouses, cookshack, outbuildings

were log and plank—timber hauled from the rider couldn't guess where, for hereabouts were only a few cottonwoods for shade. The ranch house was of sandstone, as big and solid as the old man who stood on its awninged veranda and watched the trespasser with hostile eyes under shaggy white brows. The rider put his horses over to the veranda. He was now straight in the saddle, as straight as though he hadn't been riding the barrens since false dawn.

"Mr. Duke?" he asked. "Mr. Matthew Duke?"

"My name."

"Mine's Malone. Clint Malone."

"You can't read, Malone?"

"Enough to get by on."

"Then you didn't see my sign?"

"Your sign seems to have blown over, Mr. Duke."

The old man's ruddy face tightened up. He said flatly, "Any sign I put up doesn't blow over."

Clint Malone showed a hint of a smile. "Maybe this one had a little help from a lass-roped, Mr. Duke," he stated. Then: "That's the truth of it. I didn't like your sign. I figured it didn't mean what it said. I still figure so. I've come too far to be turned back by a few words burned into a board."

"Malone, you can go to the cook shack and have supper. You can put up in the bunkhouse tonight, and give your horses some of my grain and water. In the morning, you can have breakfast—" the shaggy-browed eyes were as chill as the blunt voice—"then you'll ride out the way you came."

"And if I don't?"

"Then I'll see that my sign means what it says."

Malone showed that wispy smile again. "I'm staying on, Mr. Duke," he said easily. "I'm staying on here until I get what I want." He paused, his attention caught by the figure of a woman appearing at the doorway behind Matthew Duke. She was obscure in the evening gloom, but Malone, with a casual politeness that fitted him like a glove, touched his hat to her. He looked back at the bulky rancher. "I heard back along the trail that you've got trouble here," he went on. "I heard that about all you've got left is that old brand of yours—the .45—and that you're getting too old to ramrod a spread."

"You're a fool to listen to idle gossip, Malone."

"A man named Trevor told me. And he claimed to be a friend of yours," Malone said, "so it sounded like gospel truth. Trevor said that if you had any sense, you'd take on a good man to do your trouble-shooting—so you could sit back and take it easy, like an old man should."

Matthew Duke muttered a savage oath and

he growled, "By all that's holy, I'll drive you out of here with a horsewhip!" He seemed about to lunge at Malone, but was restrained by the woman's saying softly, "No, Matt—No. Don't you see this man is merely trying to bait you?"

Malone gave her another look. Her voice sounded young. He wished he could see her close up, and he wondered what her relationship with Matt Duke might be. He'd been told that the old rancher was not a Mormon, that his one wife was long dead, that he had no daughters. He was curious about this. Mormon or not, the old man might need a woman's companionship. Malone again put his half serious, half amused gaze onto the rancher.

"I'm hiring on with you, Duke."

"You crazy young fool! I'm not hiring riders!"

"You're hiring me," Malone said. "I'm taking over as ramrod here. You don't have to pay me wages, if you can't afford it. But when I've rid your spread of trouble and built it back to what it used to be, I'll give you my bill. It'll be a stiff one, Mr. Duke."

Matthew Duke said, "Kathryn, get me my shotgun."

The woman said, "No, Matt. Hear him out. Any man who talks as big as he does can't be all wind." She paused, then asked, "What will your bill be, Malone?"

Malone began gathering up his reins and the pack horse's lead rope. When he answered, he was looking not at Matthew Duke but at the vague form of the woman. "My bill will be for a half interest in the ranch," he stated. "A flat half interest. Half the cattle, half the horses, half the profits. It's steep, sure. But when a man is faced with the loss of everything, he can afford to save half by paying out half."

Matthew Duke choked on his rage.

The woman seemed to gasp.

Malone said, "Now I'll go care for my horses and have supper. I'll see you later, Mr. Duke, to talk the deal over."

He put his back to them, headed for the corrals.

HALF a dozen farm hands were lounging about one of the *piñon* log bunkhouses, and a couple cowhands, marked by their boots and spurs, were idle in the doorway of another. Supper for the hands was already over. Malone questioned the cook, a bald-headed little man with a game leg, about the rest of the .45 riders. The cook explained that the crew—a shorthanded one, he added—was out on the range which extended a hundred miles to the north. The riders had been out for several weeks, were supplied by pack mule, since it was no country for wagons,

and were rounding up two thousand head of cattle for the market. Malone observed, "A poor time to sell beef. The bottom's dropped out of the market."

The cook, whose name was Jake, merely shrugged. He gave Malone a hefty meal of steak, potatoes and rich gravy, then asked, "You Mormon or Gentile, stranger?"

"I'm no Mormon. Why?"

"Because then you'll take coffee."

Malone said, "Duke's riders are Mormons?"

"Some is, some ain't."

Jake placed a cup of steaming coffee beside Malone's plate. Two men came into the room, which was connected with the cookshack, and their manner said trouble.

One halted just inside the door. He was a small, dark man with beady black eyes. His nose looked too big for his wizened face, and it was crooked. A brown-paper cigarette hung limply from his thin lips.

"A visitor, eh, Bart?" he said mockingly.

The other man came toward the big plank table where Malone sat. He was thick-bodied, and his boot heels lifted him well over six feet in height. He had a ruddy coarsely good-looking face with a half amused, half ugly grin playing across it. His eyes were a baby blue. He halted halfway along the table, on Malone's side of it.

"Yeah, Ike," he said. "A visitor."

Malone went on eating. His eyes had taken on a chill glint. The cook moved back to the wide doorway into the kitchen.

The husky rider called Bart took a set of brass knuckles from his pocket, fitted them onto his right hand. "Something I picked up in a pawnshop last time I was in Salt Lake City," he said. "Been wanting to try them out."

Malone finished the last of his steak.

Bart went on, "Matt, Duke don't like visitors. He figures you need a going over, Mister Malone." He was still grinning in that half ugly way. His too bright eyes were eager. "It's like this, Mister Malone—Ike'll back me up if you try to pull your gun. He's mighty good with a gun, so don't get an idea you can throw down on me." He polished the brass knuckles on his shirt. "On your feet, Malone!"

Malone said, "A man can finish his meal, can't he?" He lifted his cup, and the coffee was scalding hot against his lips. He looked at Bart's right hand. The brass knuckles looked like four thick rings on the man's blunt fingers. Malone said, "You could kill a man with those, Bart."

"I'll quit short of that."

"Duke's orders?"

"He said just to beat the cockiness out of you."

Malone said, "You start it, you'd better kill me, Bart." His eyes were still chill, but he showed a thin smile. "You, Ike," he went on. "You pull a gun on me, you'll get a bullet through your guts. And you, Bart, you get this—"

His right arm gave a quick jerk, and the hot coffee spurted from the cup squarely into Bart's face. Bart uttered an agonized scream. Jake, the cook, gasped. Ike, over by the doorway, grabbed for his gun. Malone was on his feet now, gun in hand, and he muttered, "Don't try it, Ike!"

He moved around the table, headed along the opposite side toward Ike. He saw the indecision—the fright—on Ike's wizened face. He said again, "Don't try it, Ike!" Then he was close enough to take the little man's six-gun. He threw it out the door.

Malone turned back to Bart, saw him standing hunched over, with his hands at his face. He looked blinded, and he was groaning. Suddenly he collapsed to his knees. His big body writhed in his agony. The brass knuckles had fallen from his hand to the floor. Malone picked them up. He turned at the scared looking Jake. "He's scalded. You'd better smear something on his burns."

Jake's voice was filled with awe. "I've seen him whip half a dozen good men."

"He scared them with his loud talk," Malone said. "Take care of him. I'm going to see Matthew Duke about this."

He turned and walked out, Ike making way for him at the door.

CHAPTER TWO

Never Ride Alone

THE windows on the lower floor of the big sandstone house glowed with lamp-light. Malone hit the veranda, opened the screened door and entered without knocking. There was a broad hallway, with an arched doorway leading into the parlor to the right of it. Malone heard voices from the parlor, saw three people there. Old Matt Duke and another man—evidently a visitor, by his town clothes—sat at a table that was littered with papers and journals. A woman sat by the wide fireplace and was busily sewing. She was a young woman, and Malone judged she was still in her early twenties. He noticed that she had a wealth of dark hair, a fine profile. She seemed more intent upon the embroidering she was doing than upon the talk between the two men, but still Malone, as he stepped into the room, had the impression that she was listening to their words.

The dull sound of his boot heels against the polished floor stopped the talk, caused both

men to look around. Matthew Duke frowned, looked startled. His visitor gave Malone no more than a glance, then returned to studying some papers. He was a distinguished looking man of perhaps a little more than fifty, but, no doubt from having led a more or less comfortable life, possessed the manner of a much younger man. He was slender, rather pale, gray at the temples. All in all, he made a fine appearance. But the sight of him made the chill glint come back into the eyes of Clint Malone. Across the wide room, the girl's needle fell idle. Her eyes became busy with Malone, decidedly woman-fashion. Malone did loom big, and, despite his gauntness, he possessed a hint of strength that was above and beyond that of ordinary men. It was not Bart's sort of strength, merely a thing of brawn, but something within Malone. It was a hint of power. It filled that big room.

Malone walked straight to the table, lay the brass knuckles in front of Matthew Duke. "Bart won't be needing these any more," he stated. "You'd better pay him off, Mr. Duke."

Matthew Duke didn't speak, but there was grudging respect along with the startled surprise in his tired old eyes.

Malone said, "Pay him off. There's no use keeping a man on once the fight's taken out of him. What was his job here, anyway?"

The old man didn't answer. The girl did. She said, "He was our bronc buster." Hers was the voice Malone had heard earlier.

The visitor looked up, said, "What's wrong with Bart Kenyon? He's always been a good hand—one of the best."

"He's not the same man he was."

"How so?"

"Something happened to him."

Matthew Duke said, with an effort, "All right, Malone—you win. Any man who can whip Bart Kenyon can have what he wants. You're hired. You'll get the same wages as the rest of the hands."

"That wasn't the deal, Mr. Duke," said Malone. "But we'll talk about that later. Right now, there's something else I want to take up. I hear your crew is on roundup. This is no time to send cattle to market. We'll hold them until the price climbs."

The visitor stared at Malone, and demanded, "Matt, who is this man? What right does he have to meddle in your business?"

"He's a drifter. He showed up tonight and said he was hiring on."

Before the visitor could reply to that, Malone said, "Maybe you'd tell me what this man is doing here."

"He's John Reardon from Payson," Matthew Duke said. "He's my lawyer. He's trying to save me from bankruptcy, and he advises me to raise as much money as I can—to keep me from losing my ranch. The bank at

Payson is crowding me on notes of mine they hold." His voice took on an edge of sarcasm. "If you can give me better advice, go ahead."

"I advise you not to sell cattle at present prices."

"Now, see here, my good man—"

It was John Reardon speaking. He shoved back his chair and rose, facing Malone. "For a drifter, you've got a gall," he went on. "You may have whipped Bart Kenyon, but—"

Malone broke in, "So you call yourself Reardon now?"

The man said, "What's that?" in a suddenly hollow voice.

"You didn't always go by the name Reardon," Malone told him. "Maybe Mr. Duke would like to know your other name, Mister Reardon." He gestured toward the table. "Gather up your papers and get out. And stay away from this ranch. If we need a lawyer, we'll find another one."

Matthew Duke bellowed an oath. The girl came quickly from her chair to confront Malone. "Malone, just what do you think you are?" she demanded. "Do you want to ruin Matthew Duke? Why, this is insane! It's the craziest thing I ever heard of!"

Malone felt his pulse quicken as he gazed at her. She was attractive; she had a wholesome beauty. Not taking his eyes off her, he said, "What do you think, Mister Reardon?"

The lawyer said, in that hollow tone, "Maybe you're right, Malone. Maybe you'd better get a new lawyer—now that you're running Duke Ranch."

He began gathering up his papers, stuffing them into his brief case, and his hands were trembling violently. Both Matthew Duke and the girl stared at him in disbelief. They could see the fear in John Reardon. His papers packed, Reardon took up his hat, walked to the hall doorway. He paused there to say, "I'm sorry this happened, Matt. My advice was the best I could give. I'm sorry you won't be able to follow it."

The old man heaved up out of his chair. He looked like a shaggy, white-maned lion and his voice had a growl to it.

"Dammit!" he bellowed. "The man's loco! John, come back here. We'll go on as we were. I may be old and addle-brained because of my age, but no crazy drifter is going to run my ranch!"

He strode toward a gun rack on the wall on the fireplace side of the room, and took down a shotgun. He cocked both barrels, and the weapon was aimed at Clint Malone.

"Now get the hell out, you damn' fool!"

"If I go, you're done for, Mr. Duke."

"If you don't go, I'll blast you out of here!"

The old man meant it. Malone saw that in his fierce eyes. He shrugged, turned toward

the doorway. He paused, stared at John Reardon, said, "Your luck has run out, tin-horn. From now on, you'd better go armed. It won't save your hide, but it'll give you more of a chance. I'm going to kill you, Reardon. I could talk—and let somebody else do it. But I want you for myself."

Reardon didn't speak. He was pale. He looked sick.

Malone walked out.

OUTSIDE he rolled and lit a cigarette. As the match flared, a horse started moving somewhere in the darkness. Malone was a bit slow, then. He lifted the match to the cigarette, then some warning clanged in his brain. He dropped match and cigarette, and himself. The rider's gun blazed as Malone dropped. He heard the shriek of the slug. He got his own gun out and, flat on the ground, tried to find a target. Hoofs drummed. Malone glimpsed the shadowy shape of horse and rider, moving away from him. He held his fire, muttered, "Later, Bart—later."

Matthew Duke and the girl came from the house. They stared as Malone picked himself up, but said nothing. Malone headed for the bunkhouse where he'd taken his gear after off-saddling his horses. At the other bunkhouse, the farm hands stood looking his way and talking to each other in low voices. Jake was in the doorway of his cook shack, and said, "Next time, he's apt to get you, Malone."

Malone said, "Apt to," without stopping.

The cowhands' bunkhouse had its door closed but lamplight showed from its windows. Malone wasn't making much noise as he walked to the door. He shoved it open, stepped in, caught the under-sized hardcase, Ike, going through gear. Ike had opened Malone's warsack, had rummaged through it for whatever he could find. He had a book in his hands as he turned startled by Malone's entrance.

Malone's face stiffened. "Ike, you should have known Bart Kenyon isn't the man to get me."

Ike said sheepishly, "I guess you're right, Malone." He still had the book open in his hands, and by the look on his face it must have begun to feel red-hot. Malone crossed and took it from him.

"Just curious, Ike?"

"That's all, Malone."

"Maybe you'd better take a horse and follow Bart."

Ike winced. "Outside," he said, a whine in his voice, "I'm wanted."

"And if you stay, you'll try to put a bullet in my back."

"Hell, Malone, a tough hombre like you can't be scared of a hombre like me. Let me

stay on here and I'll stop packing a gun."

"In this country, a man would be a fool to go without a gun."

"Well, thanks, Malone."

"For what?"

"For letting me stay on," said Ike. "That's it, ain't it?"

"Yes."

"Then, thanks," Ike said, with a humble sort of gratitude.

Malone turned away. He carried his bed roll and warsack to one of the bunks. He sat down, placed the book on his knee, rolled and lit another cigarette. Ike crossed to a bunk on the opposite side and sat down. He sat and gazed at Malone, coughed a little, rubbed his chin, scratched the under-side of his thigh. Curiosity was written all over his homely face. Malone said finally, "Ask it, Ike."

"You read that book?"

"I've looked into it, sometimes by a camp-fire."

"Bible, ain't it?"

"Yeah."

Ike gave another forced cough. "My last name's Shane," he said. "I'm from Texas. Old Matt Duke was from Texas, back fifteen years ago. Came this way from the Panhandle, after a couple years of drought blamed near ruined him. The story is, he drove twenty-five hundred head of Texas longhorns to Utah—along with three hundred horses. He got rid of his Texas cowhands when he got here, hired on Mormons. Last couple of years he's been taking on what the Mormons call Gentiles, again. I heard tell that five years ago, Old Matt was running forty thousand head of cattle on this forsaken range—Bart Kenyon hails from Colorado."

"I'm from Arizona, if that's what you want to know."

"Arizona, eh?" Ike Shane said thoughtfully. Then: "Matt Duke is too old. He's losing his grip. Besides, his luck's run out. Two summers now, there ain't been enough water. This summer's bad, sure. But the past two—" Ike shook his head, distressed. "You ever see cattle die for lack of water, Malone? Die by the hundreds? It's a hell of a sight."

"Go on," Malone said.

"Well, along with the drought there came rustlers."

"Rustlers around here?"

"Sure. Because of Payson being a boomtown. It used to have maybe two, three hundred people. It's big now, since that copper mine started up. And where there's miners and smelter workers, and their families, you can sell beef. Rustled beef."

"Why didn't Matt Duke put a stop to the rustling?"

"He's shorthanded. He can't afford a big

enough crew. And he's too old to ride out with a Winchester across his saddle. Why, he must be more'n seventy." Ike paused, stared hard at Malone. "And he ain't got no son to do the job for him."

Malone stared back at him. "You asking me a question?"

Ike shook his head. "You couldn't be his son. Old Matt's wife died more'n forty years ago, the way I heard. And I reckon, since he claims not to be a Mormon, he only had one wife."

Malone dropped his quirky butt, ground it beneath his boot heel. Not looking at Ike Shane, he said, "The girl in the house?"

"Kathryn Wyatt? Kathie, we call her," Ike said. "She just keeps house for the old man. Herb Wyatt, her father, was the only Texan Matt kept on when he settled here. Herb was more farmer than ranchhand, and he put in the hay for winter forage. He died a couple years ago. Kathie's nothing to Matt Duke but what I said—a housekeeper. Maybe he looks on her like she was his daughter. I guess that's it."

"Any men hang around her?"

"Bart Kenyon had his eye on her."

Malone nodded, as though not surprised by that. He said, "You know anything about that lawyer, John Reardon?" He saw a veiled look come into Ike Shane's beady eyes. "All right—forget I asked."

Ike was silent for a time, then rose and closed the door which Malone had left open. He returned and pitched his voice low. "Bart Kenyon is Reardon's man," he said. "Like I was Bart's man—until tonight. That tinhorn lawyer wants to ruin old Matt Duke. He hates the old man. I don't know why."

"That's what I've got to find out," Malone muttered, as though thinking aloud. "Why? Why Reardon wants to ruin the old man. I know why he hates Matt, but hate isn't enough to make one man work hard to ruin another. Reardon's got something to gain out of it."

Ike Shane stared, his eyes full of curiosity again. "I've put my cards face up on the table," he said. "And I'll show some more. Bart Kenyon is Reardon's man, but he's something more. He's hand-in-glove with the rustler bunch." He paused, waited. When Malone said nothing, he suggested, "Maybe you've got a stake in this game."

"Maybe."

"You're a friend of Matt Duke?"

Malone formed one of his wispy smiles. "A friend, sure," he said. "He'll use a scatter-gun on me if I don't clear out of here. No, I'm no friend to Matt Duke. I never saw the old fool until I rode in here tonight." He saw the look of astonishment on Ike's face. "How come you were so quick to squeal about Bart Kenyon?"

Ike thought that over. "I've been sick of him for a long time," he said finally. "Sick of him pushing me around. I'd have used a gun on him long ago, if I'd had the guts. But it wasn't that. I guess it's because you didn't make me leave here—and because you didn't jump me for snooping in your war-sack."

"What're you going to do with what you found out snooping?"

"I didn't find out anything, Malone."

Malone held the Book. "You looked in here, didn't you?"

Ike Shane was as sheepish as a schoolboy with lessons unprepared. "I can't read," he said. Then, with Malone silent, he added, "I wouldn't cross you up, even if I did know something about you. You treated me white—when you had good reason to gun me down. I swear it, Malone—I'll side you. I'll be your partner. I'll keep watch so that when Bart Kenyon tries to get you, it won't be with a shot in the back."

Malone stood up and said, "I'm turning in."

For the first time since coming to the .45 Ranch, he looked a little shaken.

MALONE bedded down with his six-gun and he didn't sleep soundly. He wouldn't sleep easily until the game came to its end in a crash of guns. Then he would be free to rest. Or, if luck turned against him, he would fall into a sleep from which there was no waking. He was a marked man. He had become marked the instant John Reardon heard the name Malone there in the parlor of Matthew Duke's ranch house. And before that. For Bart Kenyon would never forget or forgive the man who had thrown scalding coffee into his face. Too, there was old Matt Duke. The threat of his shotgun was no idle one. . . . So Malone's sleep was full of nightmares, and at the first pale gray of dawn he left his bunk.

He dressed, went out and doused his head at the pump. Gasping from the chill shock, he squeezed the water from his hair. He went to the corrals and dropped a rope on a .45 horse, a big roan gelding, and saddled it with his double-cinched rig. By then smoke was rolling from the chimney of the cook-shack. Jake was astir, starting breakfast for the farm hands. Malone went to the shack and got fed first. Twenty minutes later, he was riding north across the desert range.

He had no destination. He simply wanted to be away from the ranch buildings when old Matt Duke came charging out like a berserk bull to see if he had cleared out. And he wanted to think. Malone had to figure out what the next step would be.

He knew at least that what he had learned at Payson, from Trevor, Old Matt's friend, was the truth. Matt Duke was in trouble and, though the old man didn't realize it, John Reardon was behind that trouble. Reardon had Duke's confidence and, until last night, he had had Bart Kenyon posted at the .45 to aid the rustlers that were cutting down the .45 herds and bringing Matthew Duke closer to ruin.

It was an old game, thirty years old. It had started before Clint Malone was born, back in Texas, so long ago the origin must be dim in Matthew Duke's memory. But at the time, Duke had known John Reardon by name only—and since then Reardon had quit using his real name. But Reardon's memory was good. The name Malone could put fear into his eyes and make his hands tremble. Clint Malone thought, *I could tell the old man.* But he knew that he wouldn't.

Once Duke knew, he would take a gun and go after John Reardon. And Reardon would kill him. Besides, Malone wanted Reardon for himself. Reardon had wronged Matthew Duke, but he had wronged Clint Malone more. Too, Malone had no reason to like Matthew Duke. Part of the blame for thirty years ago had been Duke's. Malone told himself, *I'm not forgetting that.* He had come to Utah to settle with John Reardon, and to make Matthew Duke pay for his guilt. And the price was high—Reardon's life and half of what Matthew Duke owned! High but fair. Malone had tried to be fair, always.

The hot sun climbed high behind Malone. He rode mile after mile across Matthew Duke's desolate empire and, at mid-morning, halted in the welcome shade on the north side of a sandrock butte. He dismounted, took binoculars from his saddle bag, and began a treacherous climb up the rough side of the butte. He was sweated and winded by the time he reached the rough flatness of the top. He took the glasses from their leather case and scanned the broken, rocky country. His naked eye had seen the dust cloud to the north. The glasses showed him the cattle and riders. It was the round-up herd. Two thousand head of .45 cattle on the way to market. Malone frowned. He focused his glasses on a range of red hills to the west. They stood out bold and bleak, naked of trees and brush and grass. They were cut by gorges and canyons that could swallow up all the cattle on Matthew Duke's range. There was rustler country.

Malone turned the binoculars south, picked up a rider following his trail. The rider was coming slowly, and it was several minutes before Malone was able to identify him as Ike Shane. Farther south, perhaps a mile behind Ike, there was another rider. Malone

frowned over that, then turned and started descending the butte.

He was hunkered down with his back to a boulder, a cigarette between his lips, when Ike Shane came around the base of the butte. Ike's wizened face smiled a greeting. He reined in, hooked a leg about his saddle horn, pulled makings from his shirt pocket.

"You should've waited for me, Malone," he said. "You shouldn't be riding this range alone." He rolled and got his cigarette going. "They won't let you live, friend," he went on. "Reardon must know you're up to something, and Bart Kenyon won't forget. They've got some tough friends, too. If one of them gets behind you—"

"You should talk, Ike. There's somebody trailing you."

"Eh? How do you know?"

"We'll wait. You'll see."

Ike said uneasily, "Malone, you got eyes in back of your head?"

"Who is it, Ike?"

"I don't know. That's gospel, Malone!" Ike said.

Malone said no more. He flicked his quirky butt at a lizard crawling around the base of a rock. They waited.

The rider came edging around the butte as Ike Shane had done, then reined in with a nervous start on coming upon the two waiting men so abruptly. Malone, too, was surprised. The rider was Kathryn Wyatt. Malone came to his feet. Ike spoke to the girl.

She said, "Ike, I'd like to talk with Malone."

Ike said, "Sure, Kathie," giggled his horse about and rode off.

Malone walked toward the girl, almost warily. His eyes appraised her, from hat to boots. She wore mannish range clothes, sat her pinto pony as easily as a man. The raw sunlight revealed no defects in her beauty. She waited until Malone stood by her horse.

"I wanted to talk with you," she said, "alone—away from Matt Duke."

"I'm flattered, Kathryn."

"Don't be. My interest in you isn't personal," she told him. "Who are you, Malone, and what are you?"

"You know my right name. I was a drifter. Now I'm ramrod of .45 Ranch. Did Matthew Duke start gunning for me this morning?"

"Matthew Duke is a fine man, Malone. I'm fond of him. I won't stand by and let him be hurt. Were you sent by the Payson copper crowd?"

Malone said he was not, then submitted to Kathryn's scrutiny.

"You're a hard man to read," she finally said. "I can't tell whether you're lying or telling the truth. If you're not a trouble-maker in the hire of the copper men, why are you here?"

MALONE was silent for a long moment, wondering how much he should tell this girl. He wondered how much he wanted Matthew Duke to know, for Kathryn would surely report this meeting to the old man. Malone said slowly, "I'll make a deal with you, Kathryn. I'll tell you why I came here, if you tell me why the copper men want to make trouble for Matt Duke."

The girl said, "You don't know that? There's a big copper deposit on 45 range. Some prospectors for an outfit called Desert Copper Mining Company located the deposit about a year ago. It's three miles east of here. Desert Copper wants to lease that part of the range, and take out the ore. Matt won't have it. Ever since he turned down their offer, he's been having trouble. His stock is being rustled in big bunches. The Payson Bank is making things tough for him, pressing him for money it lent him on notes. The bank is playing the copper men's game, because nowadays they are more important than a desert cattleman."

"Why won't he lease them the land around the deposit?" Malone asked. "It'd be a small part of his range. The lease money would put him back on his feet, and he'd have no more trouble with the copper crowd."

"Matthew Duke is old and set in his ways. He doesn't want a mining camp and maybe a smelter in the heart of his range. Besides, the deposit is close to his best source of water—Dead Ute Tank. A mining camp there would ruin the water supply for cattle."

"Well, that's reason enough," Malone admitted, "when you look at it from a cattleman's viewpoint. Is there a chance that John Reardon is connected with the copper crowd?"

Kathryn looked startled. "Why do you ask that?"

Malone told her that Ike Shane had revealed that Bart Kenyon was tied up with the rustlers and was also John Reardon's man. "And I have reason to know," he added, "that Reardon bears Matthew Duke a grudge."

"I can't believe that of Mr. Reardon," the girl said slowly, as though thinking aloud. "He always seemed to have Matt's interests at heart, and he's been Matt's lawyer for nearly a year—still, he did urge Matt to deal with Desert Copper."

"Reardon's a tricky one."

"Last night, before he left the ranch," Kathryn said, still in that thoughtful way, "he was like a different man. He'd changed after you threatened him. He said that if Matt didn't follow his advice—to sell off his cattle or to sign with Desert Copper, and raise money to satisfy the bank—he'd lose the ranch within a month. It did seem like a threat."

Malone nodded. He had learned why John Reardon was dealing—double-dealing—with

Matthew Duke. Reardon might bear a thirty-year-old grudge, but he was more likely to be motivated by greed. The man was probably the power behind Desert Copper. Malone saw that Kathryn was gazing at him with less hostility, but still with curiosity.

He said, "I'll keep my part of the deal. I came to Utah hunting John Reardon. I've been hunting him for years. The only time I didn't hunt him was when I found myself broke and had to take a job to get a stake. It was like hunting a needle in a haystack. I'd never seen Reardon until I reached Payson two weeks ago. I knew he was a gambler part of the time, and sometimes a lawyer. I knew he kept to mining towns, and I looked for him in Arizona, New Mexico, Nevada, Montana—and not long ago I met a man who knew him. This man told me why I couldn't find him—that he'd changed his name to John Reardon. It was easier, then, and I located him at Payson."

"And followed him to here?"

Malone shook his head. "I didn't know he was visiting here," he said. "But I heard in Payson that he was acting as Matthew Duke's lawyer. Because of that, I decided to find out what he was up to before I settled my business with him. I knew he had reason to hate Matthew Duke, and I figured he was working on some tinhorn scheme."

"You're wrong about that," Kathryn said. "There's no reason for John Reardon to hate Matt."

"There is. Matt doesn't realize it because Reardon didn't always go by that name. And when this trouble started, thirty years ago, the two of them never came face to face."

"Thirty years ago!"

"Yes. It started before you and I were born, Kathryn."

"And you mean to kill Reardon because of something that happened that long ago? It's crazy, Malone!"

Malone's face had taken on a rocky look. "It started thirty years ago," he said, "but it's been going on ever since. When I was a kid of twelve, Reardon killed my father. Murdered him. That's why I've been hunting him all these years. That's why you saw Reardon tremble last night when he heard my name."

"But what has it to do with Matthew Duke?"

"He was mixed up in the start of the trouble, back in Texas."

"You're wrong, Malone!" the girl cried. "If that was true, he'd know. He'd remember!"

Malone said flatly, "Matthew Duke had a part in it, whether he knows it or not. Part of the blame was his. I didn't come here hating the old man, but I have no love for him either. When I saw that Reardon was behind the

trouble here, I made up my mind to make Matthew Duke pay for his part in what happened. I'll settle this trouble by killing John Reardon—and then Matthew Duke's got to pay. The price is still half of what he owns."

The hostility was back in Kathryn's eyes. "I won't let you get away with it, Malone," she said fiercely. "I won't let you rob that old man."

CHAPTER THREE

Thirty Years Is Too Long

SHE jerked the pinto's head up, lay her quirt across its rump, and swung away before Malone could stop her. He leapt for his own horse, stepped to the saddle, took after her. But once he circled the base of the butte, and saw Kathryn riding at a hard lope, he changed his mind and pulled in. He had alienated her at the very moment of winning her over. Nothing he could say or do now would stop Kathryn Wyatt from considering him as an enemy. Malone stared after her, the rocky look leaving his face. He felt a little shaken, and it took him a long moment to understand why.

There was no rhyme or reason for it. He had seen other desirable women in his travels from one mining country to another. Some of them certainly possessed the quality of loyalty Kathryn showed for the old boss of .45 Ranch. But Malone was taken by her as he had been by no other girl. He began to smile. The price he would collect at .45 Ranch was rising. It now included Kathryn Wyatt!

He was still looking after her, now far south across the desert, when Ike Shane came riding back. For a minute or two, Malone seemed unaware of the man. But finally he turned to Ike.

"The round-up herd is on the trail," he said. "Matt is bound to send those cattle to market, because John Reardon tells him that's one of the two ways he can raise money. I've a hunch Reardon won't let the herd get to Payson. I know he doesn't want Matt Duke to raise that money. He's got some sneak trick up his sleeve."

"You figure he'll have rustlers jump the herd?"

"That'd be an easy way to ruin the old man."

"What're you going to do, Malone?"

"When I find out what Reardon's up to, I'll know that," Malone told him. "I've got to watch my step from now on, because Reardon will be on guard. He knows I'm out to get him, and he's bound to keep me from forcing him into a gunfight. And I won't kill him in cold blood. I've got to finish him off so that it's not murder." He studied Ike Shane,

decided to trust him. "If you left the ranch, the law'd pick you up?"

Ike nodded.

"You're not safe in Payson?"

"Payson's safe for me, but no place farther down the line."

"How about riding there and looking up Bart Kenyon?" Malone said. "Make him think I've run you off the ranch, and maybe he'll tell you why Reardon wants that herd on the trail. You can make it look good, and come back to the ranch as soon as you pump Bart."

Ike said he'd do it, but he looked a little worried. "Bart'll be liable to kill me if he finds out I'm spying on him and that crowd."

"He won't find out. Just don't say the wrong thing."

"All right, Malone. But it'll take me two, three days."

"Time enough. It'll take that long for the herd to cross the range," Malone said and held out a friendly hand. "You side me, Ike, and I'll see that Matt Duke takes good care of you—once this trouble is settled."

After shaking on it, they rode toward the ranch headquarters. There Ike saddled a fresh horse. He got his bed roll and warsack from the bunkhouse and tied them to his saddle. "To make it look good," he said. Mounting, he rode south.

"You getting rid of all my hands, Malone?"

The harsh voice slapped out at Malone from behind. He turned and saw Matthew Duke coming toward him from the barn. He was surprised that the old man didn't have his shotgun along. Backing up, Malone slouched against the corral fence and started to roll a smoke. Matt Duke halted before him, solid as a weather-beaten old rock. Hair, eyebrows and mustache were snow-white and shaggy. His heavy face was florid. His eyes were bright with rage. Looking at him, Malone thought that it was too bad a man got too old. He had a notion that Matt Duke had been a holy terror when he bucked trouble in his youth. Malone took his time and lighted his cigarette, then said, "Ike went on a little job for me."

"Maybe you didn't savvy what I said last night, Malone!"

"I figure you changed your mind."

"How so?"

"You came at me without a gun," Malone told him. "I guess Kathryn talked to you when she got back."

Duke still had a blustery look, but there was uneasiness in his eyes. "That crazy talk you gave her," he said. "About something that happened back in Texas thirty years ago. That's a long time. Too long a time for you to know anything about it. I was ranching along the Brazos, then. It was during the War, and I was having all kinds of trouble.

I made plenty of enemies at War's end, with carpetbaggers and turncoat Texans. I can't remember that John Reardon was one of them."

"He had another name then."

"What was it, Malone?"

"Ask him, next time you need legal advice."

"Damn you, Malone; if I was just ten years younger I'd beat it out of you!" he shouted. Then, more calmly: "What's it got to do with you, anyway? You can't be more than thirty, if you're that. Maybe Reardon did murder your father, like you claim, but I never knew anybody named Malone until you came along. I can't remember doing harm to anybody by that name. Yet you told Kathie—"

"Matt, you didn't harm any Malone—so far as I know," Malone told him. "You did dirt to somebody else, and that's why I'm going to lay claim to half your spread."

"Stop hedging. Come out with what's on your mind," the old man muttered. "If I did somebody dirt, I want to know about it."

"Maybe I'll tell you when it's time for the payoff, and maybe I won't," Malone said. "Your roundup herd is about fifteen miles north. You still sending those cattle to market?"

"You're blamed right I am," Old Matt growled, and stomped away.

THAT evening, after supper, Malone went to the bunkhouse and stropped his razor off the sole of his boot. He lathered up and shaved, then took clean clothes from his warsack and went over to the creek, behind the cottonwoods, and stripped down for a bath. Later, when Kathryn was seated on the ranch house veranda, he strolled over and sat down on the steps for a smoke. That didn't do him any good. The girl didn't speak, and Malone couldn't think of anything to say that might make her talk.

He could hear the old man prowling about inside, like a caged cougar. Finally Malone said, "Old Matt's jumpy tonight."

Kathryn said, "What else did you expect, after what you've done?" There was winter in her voice. "I wish you'd never come here, Malone."

She left her rocking chair to go inside, but she halted when Malone spoke her name. She said, "Yes?" without turning toward him. He rose, saw her silhouetted by the lamplight from the doorway. She wore no mannish clothes tonight. Her dress was entirely feminine; its sleeves and bodice were tight-fitting, and from its gathered-in waist the skirt flowed in billowy folds to an inch of the floor. She had done something special with her hair tonight, and added a bit of artificial flower to its dark softness. Malone saw the curve of her cheek, the sweep of her throat. He moved

toward her, and heard her catch a sharp breath. He stopped behind her, wanting to touch her and afraid that if he did she would run from him.

"You like it here?" he asked.

"It's been my home for nearly fifteen years."

"You wouldn't want to leave, I suppose."

"Leave Matt?" she whispered. "When he needs me?"

Malone had his answer. He said, "No, you wouldn't leave."

"Did you want to say something more to me?"

"Don't think too hard of me, Kathryn,"

Malone said, and turned away. He was not sure; for he did not glance back, but he thought she stood there looking after him.

LATE in the afternoon of the following day the roundup herd drew within sight of the ranch buildings. By sundown the cattle were turned into a string of small canyons two miles west, for there was not enough grass on the flats close by .45 headquarters. A packer, bearded and dusty, came in with a string of mules loaded with water kegs, grub panniers and bed rolls. This pack train served as the crew's chuck wagon, Matthew Duke and Kathryn rode out to look over the herd, the drag of which had still to be hazed into grassy canyons. Malone, too, saddled up and rode out. There was dust, noise, confusion. The cattle bawled, riders yelled and whistled. Those cowhands were gaunt and sun-blackened, hard-worn by weeks on the desert range. Malone found Matt Duke and Kathryn talking to the roundup boss, a rangy man of fifty and shaggy with an iron-gray beard.

Duke was saying, "You'll rest the crew tomorrow, Walt, then put the herd on the trail to Payson the day after."

Malone heard Walt reply, "This is a big bunch to cut out of the herd. You're understocked now, Matt."

"I know. How are things up north?"

"Bad. Plenty of signs of rustlers."

"You didn't come across any of them?"

Walt shook his head. "They kept away while we were on roundup," he stated. "They're too smart to risk a gunfight."

There was more talk between the two men, but Malone didn't listen to it. He was more concerned about the herd. He was increasingly sure that Reardon would have his rustling crowd jump the trail herd. Yet he couldn't believe that any wild bunch would tackle the .45 crew; as Walt said, the rustlers were too smart to risk a gunfight. Something else than a raid was planned. But unless Ike Shane found out Reardon's plans, and got back in time, there was no way of knowing what that something else was. Malone was worried. It was a risky gamble, trusting a man like

Ike Shane. Then Malone thought, *Why should I worry about it?*

Old Matthew Duke wouldn't listen to reason, wouldn't heed warnings. He would have to pay the price of his folly. Let him put his cattle on the trail and find out whether he or Clint Malone was the fool. Malone told himself that he didn't care, yet when he saw Matt Duke through the swirling dust he knew that he did care. He had a grudging respect for the stubborn, prideful old man. That was perhaps because they were of the same flesh and blood.

WITH the roundup crew in, the .45 headquarters pulsed with life. Those cowhands were noisy, rowdy, and they badgered Jake about the poor quality of his cooking—then stuffed themselves, as though his were the best food they'd ever eaten. Over at the creek, stripped down to wash, they frolicked like kids in a swimming hole. Later, in the bunkhouse, they were noisy over cards, while one cowboy strummed a guitar and another teased a mouth organ. The next day they were quieter, taking it easy.

Malone watched for Ike Shane all that day. He kept watch most of the night. But Ike didn't show up. In the morning the crew breakfasted early and saddled up in the pale light of dawn. The packer put his mules onto the trail, the kegs filled with water and the panniers with grub. The cattle were driven from the canyons and strung out for the trail, and pointed south. Matthew Duke and Kathryn rode out to see the drive get under way.

Malone didn't ride out. He knew that he couldn't stop the drive with words or force. Perched atop a corral fence, he watched the great herd head out. The pack mules and remuda were already far south. When Old Matt and Kathryn returned, they found Malone still perched there. He was smoking a quirky cigarette and frowning.

Matthew Duke said, "I figured you would try to stop the drive, Malone. What's the trouble—too many tough hands for you to buck?"

"That's one reason, Matt."

"And the other?"

"No use trying to reason with a man playing the fool."

Old Matt sputtered, "Why, you—" He couldn't get it out.

Kathryn said, "Nothing can happen to the herd, Malone. We warned the boys to watch out for trouble."

Malone said nothing to that, but continued to peer out across the range. He kept watch all that day, but there was no sign of Ike Shane.

Jake announced supper by clanging the old

brass bell mounted on a post outside the cookshack, and the farm hands came in from the fields. Even while eating, Malone went twice to the door to look for little Ike Shane. The second time he gave a grunt. A rider was coming across the range from the southwest at a hard gallop. It was Ike.

Malone ran to the corrals to meet him. Ike's horse was about done in. Ike jerked it to a stop and dropped from the saddle. He was almost as sweated and winded as the animal, and he took a full minute to get his breath back.

"I did as you wanted, Malone," he muttered, "and almost got gunned down. Bart Kenyon believed that you'd run me off at first. But when I tried to get away, he started shooting. You were right. He's with that rustler bunch, and they're going to jump the herd."

"When and how, Ike?"

"Tonight, at Broken Wheel Pass."

"They're going to try to steal the whole herd?"

Ike shook his head. "Bart had a man posted in the hills, so he'd know when the herd left here. He and the rest—there's eight of them—rode out from Payson this morning. I was with them, trying to make my getaway. Maybe they'll call it off, now that Bart knows I tricked him. But they planned to hide up in the cliffs, and wait for the herd to come through. Bart figures the trail crew will keep the herd moving through the pass during the night, then bed it down on the grass flats to the south. That's when he'll pull his dirty work, when the cattle are jammed in the pass."

"What's he going to pull, Ike?"

"He's going to stampede the herd," Ike said. "He and his men have some dynamite capped and fused. They'll light the fuses and drop the sticks down on the herd. The explosions will kill some of the cattle, and Bart's hoping the rest will stampede and kill themselves by going over the cliff of the canyon just south of the Pass. John Reardon planned it, Malone. Reardon wants that herd wiped out."

"You go tell that to Matt Duke."

"What're you going to do, Malone?"

"Ride out and warn the trail crew, if it's not too late," said Malone, and turned to the corral to rope his buckskin.

Malone had an hour of daylight left when he rode out. He put the buckskin into an easy lope, letting the big animal warm up and find its own full stride. The shadow cast by the horse and himself raced alongside, grew longer and longer until finally, with the last of the sun down, it faded away. As the twilight deepened, Malone saw the rock hills ahead. He saw the dust cloud lifted by the lumbering herd. He still had miles to ride,

and his buckskin, tiring, couldn't keep up the pace.

Malone slowed it to an easier lope for perhaps a mile, impatience goading him all the while. Darkness crept in about him. He lost sight of the dust cloud, but a huge red moon rose in the southeast to show him the jagged hills toward which the cattle were moving. Finally, Malone heard the bawling of the cattle and drew his six-gun and fired three shots into the air.

Ten minutes later, the buckskin's gait now a stumbling one, Malone came upon the drag of the herd. The trail boss, Walt Hanlon, came to meet him. "You do that shooting, Malone?"

Malone nodded, but didn't explain at once. There was enough moonlight for him to see the looming rocks—the walls of the pass. The point of the herd was already surging through the narrow cut. Despair filled Malone. It was in his voice, as he yelled, "Hold back the herd, Walt! Bart Kenyon's crowd is up the cliffs. They're going to drop dynamite on your cattle!"

Walt Hanlon chuckled. "Matt Duke told me you were a crazy one, Malone. He said you'd try to stop me from getting these cattle to market. He sure had you figured right."

"Dammit, man—I'm telling you—"

"And I'm telling you," said Hanlon, drawing his gun, "to get the hell away from here. You pull anything that'll stampede this herd and I'll gut-shoot you. Ride out, Malone!"

Malone silently cursed Walt Hanlon for a blind fool. The man meant what he said; he'd use that gun given the slightest excuse. Malone said, "All right, all right," his voice thick with his rage. He giggled his horse about, rode away.

He turned off west along the rocky uplifts until he found a slope that a horse could take. He put the buckskin to climbing, then realized that the animal, having been run too hard, couldn't make the climb. He left the saddle, took his Winchester from his boot, and went on afoot. As he climbed, he could hear the sounds of the cattle crowding into the pass. The .45 cowboys were driving them in with shouts and with slaps of their coiled ropes. At least half of the herd was squeezed into the cut.

Malone was close to the top of the rock barrier when the first blast came, like a clap of thunder. Another and another blast followed. Bedlam broke out in Broken Wheel Pass. Frenzied cattle surged ahead in a wild stampede, while the .45 riders shouted in helpless rage.

HALF a dozen more blasts roared above the pounding thunder of the berserk cattle. Disaster had struck, and Matthew Duke's hopes of saving his range were dying

in Broken Wheel Pass. Malone cursed with anger. Reaching the top of the rocky uplifts, he was blind to the odds against him. He worked his way over the jagged rocks, and finally glimpsed the men who had wrought the disaster.

They were fleeing back from the edge of the cliff, away from the pass, bent on escape. Malone dropped behind some broken rock, fired a shot that found no target but halted the men in their tracks. Their guns blazed, but wildly. Malone short-reined his rage; he needed to be calm now. He took aim, fired again, and a man screamed and fell. Malone levered another cartridge in the Winchester's chamber, fired once more. He made another hit. It was easy as shooting at marks.

But suddenly Bart Kenyon's voice belated, "The dirty son's over among those rocks. Get him—or he'll pin us down here!"

Malone almost laughed. He had them boxed in. He could keep them from getting to their horses—wherever they were hidden. He fired again, missed this time, and Kenyon and his companions scattered for cover. From behind rocks, from gullies, the rustlers opened fire. Their slugs ripped and tore at the sand-rock about Malone, whined viciously over him. He tried another shot, found no mark, dropped flat. A man jumped up, ran forward to flank Malone's position. He was limned by the moonlight, and Malone caught him as he ran.

Bart Kenyon swore savagely.

Malone shouted, "You come and get me, Bart!"

"Malone?"

"You guess right, Bart!"

Bart Kenyon swore again, and now Malone had him placed. Bart was crouched behind a jagged outcropping, safe enough unless he showed himself. Malone covered that outcropping, his finger ready on the rifle's trigger. But Bart, aware that he had given his position away, kept well down and let the others do the shooting. The slugs probed for Malone with deadly intent, but the rocks protected him. Finally one of the rustlers called out, "Bart, we must've got him!"

Bart was slow in answering, "Yeah, I guess we did."

Malone kept down. A shadowy figure rose from a gully, dashed for a nearby rock. He yelled, "He's done for. Let's get out of here!"

Malone didn't hear Bart Kenyon's reply. He heard instead a sound behind him. He twisted about, swinging the Winchester. Three figures loomed through the darkness. One said, "Malone?" He was Walt Hanlon.

Malone laughed, somewhat off-key. "Take cover," he said. "I've got them pinned down."

Hanlon dropped down beside him, and the other two .45 hands crouched behind what

cover they could find. The rustlers were cursing, with real despair now. And Malone said, "Watch it! They'll make a break for it."

That instant the rustlers came from cover, guns blazing, Malone counted five of them. He fired and missed. A burly figure rushed from the outcropping—Bart Kenyon. Malone heard himself yell above the roar of guns. He leaped up, fired at Bart, and missed again. He jumped the rock barrier, ran forward to head Bart off. He was only vaguely aware that another rustler had been downed—by the .45 riders—and that the other three had halted, thrown away their weapons, and lifted their hands in surrender. Only Bart Kenyon kept going, an elusive figure in the darkness. Malone kept after him until he stumbled and went sprawling, a rock jabbing into his belly and driving the wind from him. Malone lay self up, saw nothing more of his quarry—dazed for a long moment, then, picking himself up, saw nothing more of his quarry. Bart Kenyon had gotten away.

Except for him, the rustlers were dead or prisoners. But the .45 trail herd was gone. A few cattle had been killed in the pass by dynamite, and the bulk of the herd had charged on through the cut and plunged over the hundred foot cliff of a canyon south of the pass. Only a scant hundred head remained alive and not crippled so badly that they had to be killed. The cowhands riding point hadn't been able to turn the stampeding herd away from the death drop. . . . The .45 crew gathered gloomily together, talked in low voices of hanging the three prisoners. Malone was busy stripping the saddles off his spent buckskin.

"I want a fresh mount, Hanlon," he stated, and went to the remuda.

He was saddling up a big dun when Hanlon came over to him, and asked, "You going after Bart Kenyon?"

"I'll ride with you."

"Suit yourself," Malone said. "But I'm not wasting time on the way. Bart will report to Reardon, and the two of them will pull out of Payson in a hurry. I've got to finish this tonight."

They rode out together, but Hanlon's mount had been worked on the trail that day and could not keep up. Malone pulled ahead after a couple of miles and, close to midnight, rode into Payson alone.

Seen by day, Payson was an ugly blot on the desert. It was a sprawling plank town. At night it was less offensive to the eye. Darkness clothed its obscene naked look. The windows and doorways of the saloons and honkytonks splashed light into the main street, but the other business places were dark. The plank sidewalks were deserted except for a few drunks staggering homeward. Malone

rode by the string of deadfalls, reined in before the Payson Bank. John Reardon's office was across the street from the bank building, over a hardware store.

A blowing, lathered saddle mount stood before the store. Bart Kenyon's horse, surely. The two windows of Reardon's law office were aglow with lamplight, the shades only half drawn. Reardon lived in a room back of the office, and Malone knew that Bart had gone up there—up the open stairway at the side of the building—to rouse and warn Reardon that things had gone partly wrong at Broken Wheel Pass. Malone told himself, *They'll come down soon. They'll want to leave town before things catch up with them.* He smiled, but it was a mirthless smile.

The door at the side of the building opened, and Bart Kenyon descended—alone. Malone started toward him. He saw the look of shock on Bart's still unhealed, scalded face. The man whirled about, started back up the steps. He thought better of it and swung back.

The first shot was Bart Kenyon's. It struck the ground at Malone's feet. The second was Malone's. It hit Bart in the chest, slammed him against the stairs' railing. Bart tried another shot, but Malone fired again and the man collapsed.

Another gun roared, and Malone, hit as by a giant fist, pivoted about and fell to his knees. Another shot tore through him, and he sprawled on his face. But he gathered himself up, heaved upright. He swayed drunkenly as another shot blazed at him. He swung his gun up and fired a shot toward John Reardon, who was shooting from an open window of his office. Reardon fired again, and Malone staggered. But Malone had spent too many years hunting John Reardon to die without finishing his man hunt. He took aim, fired, saw his bullet take Reardon between the eyes; then he dropped his six-gun—and let himself slump down.

WALT HANLON arrived even before the townsmen gathered. It was he who had Malone moved to the office of Payson's one doctor.

Malone lay motionless, his lean face gray to the lips. He had no pain, strangely enough. He merely felt odd, numb. He saw three people come into the clean white room and stand by his bed. There was Walt Hanlon, old Matthew Duke—and Kathryn. They had tiptoed in, and now they were silent. Malone tried to speak. Only mutterings came from his throat. Kathryn leaned over him.

"We know, Clint," she whispered. "I went to the bunkhouse and looked in your gear. I found the Bible, with the record of your parents' marriage written into it. Your mother was Matthew Duke's daughter."

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Malone managed to whisper, "Yes."
 He wished he could speak more. He wanted
 to tell them the rest of it. He wanted Matthew
 Duke to know. He couldn't get it out, but it
 was all clear in his mind—the way his mother
 had explained it before she died a few months
 after Reardon had killed his father. . . . How
 Louise Duke had run away from home with a
 dude gambler she met in Denver, where she
 had been sent to school. She had been only
 seventeen, too young to realize that Jack
 Richley—who later called himself John Rear-
 don—married her only because she was the
 daughter of a cattle baron and hoped to set
 himself up for life. She had found him out
 only after Matthew Duke wrote a letter
 telling her that he was done with her—that
 he was disowning her. Her husband had
 abandoned her, then, and she hadn't dared re-
 turn home.

It was in Malone's mind, as he shifted his
 gaze to old Matt Duke. The prideful old man
 had done wrong, yet he had acted as a stern
 father might. He still didn't know how his
 daughter took jobs in honkytonks to earn a
 livelihood, until she met Lucky Jim Malone
 who married her and made her happy. A
 dozen years of happiness. Then Jack Rich-
 ley had shown up; there'd been a fight, with
 Jack Richley taking a beating. But later
 Lucky Jim Malone had been ambushed. . . .
 That was the ugly story.

"The doc—he thinks I won't pull through?"
 Malone managed to ask.

Kathryn didn't answer. She nodded, then
 turned away so that Malone couldn't see the
 truth on her face. But he knew. The doctor
 hadn't any hope for him.

A DOCTOR could be wrong, with a patient
 like Clint Malone. That same day Malone
 rallied, and Doc Benson risked an operation.
 The following day there was real hope. In a
 week Malone was sitting up in bed and
 Kathryn, his nurse, smiled happily.

It was three weeks before Malone could
 be moved, then Kathryn hired the best car-
 riage from the livery stable. Once Malone
 was seated in the rig, with Kathryn beside
 him and the driver starting the team, he
 said, "What makes you think I want to go
 back to Forty-five Ranch?"

"You've got a bill to collect, you know."
 "You want me to collect from old Matt?"
 "He needs you, Clint," Kathryn said. "He'll
 still have to fight to build back his herds, and
 he can't do it without a man like you at his
 side." She smiled at Malone, drew his arm
 about her, and whispered, "And I want you
 to have everything that's due you—every-
 thing!"

(Continued from page 111)

FROM somewhere he heard voices and raised his own in a halloo. Men fought their way through the twisted, torn river thickets. A lantern swung before his face and Old Tom looked up at Johnny Nelson, the nester he'd asked for work.

Johnny's young face was set in hard lines. "Here's one of them, Lafe," he said grimly. "Tried to blow up our dam but didn't know how to handle the dynamite, I reckon."

Rough hands seized Old Tom and dragged him clear of the fallen tree. Old Tom looked at the hard faces crowded around him. "Gents," he said, "don't go off half cocked. If you'll look around you'll find Sam Lewk, Scalings' gunman, or what's left of him. He tried to force me to blow up yore dam, but I outfoxed him. I told him once today I was a better man than he was, and by dam' I proved it."

Johnny Nelson's face didn't change. "How do we know you two weren't in cahoots. You was askin' for a job today. Maybe Scaling offered yuh this job?"

Old Tom stiffened. "He offered it, but I turned him down cold. That's when Lewk drew a gun on me and—"

For a moment the nesters were silent, then Johnny Nelson let out a loud whoop and doubled up laughing. "Damn'dest thing I ever heard of," he choked. "Pretty smart, old-timer."

One of the nesters crowded up. "I don't get it, Johnny. Looks to me like this old coot is a ringtailed liar and tryin' to ease out of a hangrope."

Johnny Nelson shook his head. "Think a minute, Lafe. The oldster here had Lewk launch that raft where Flint Creek ties into the river. No wonder Lewk blew hisself to hades. He set the raft out in a whirlpool!"

Old Tom grinned. "That's right, Nelson. I never spent such a fifteen minutes in my life as waiting for that dynamite to go off. I knowed that raft was going around in a circle and I knowed I had to move before the dynamite went off. Lewk being new to this country didn't know about the whirlpool and it was too dark for him to see it."

Johnny Nelson looked at Old Tom thoughtfully. "I was tellin' the boys today we oughta' hire somebody to stand guard on that dam all the time. We got a two room cabin built up there right by it, and we'll pay forty a month and found. Sure be proud to have yuh take the job, old-timer."

Old Tom sucked in a deep breath and let it out slow.

"Son," he said quietly, "I'd sure be proud to have it."

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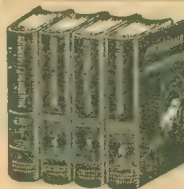
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FIFTEEN WESTERN TALES

(Continued from page 85)

the flash of moonlight on metal, saw the saddlegun York had snaked out of the boot.

He ran straight on. The rifle swiveled on him, flame tipped its muzzle and pain hit him with its solid impact. But even as he broke stride and slammed around to hit the dark wall with his shoulders, Rigdon had his six-gun up. He was still on his feet when York crumpled, close under the hoofs of the frightened bronc.

HE WAS in the Holbrooks' living room, with dawn just paling beyond the windows and the birds in the big elm tree beginning their song. The burn of anti-septic had died out of the shoulder wound the doctor had bound for him, leaving the ache of the bullet itself; and Joe Rigdon was suddenly too dead tired to pay much attention to that.

He saw Tim Garber stretched on a couch by the window, bandaged and with a grin on his strained features. The room seemed full of faces—friendly faces—but Rigdon didn't have eyes for anyone much but Nancy Holbrook and her father.

It was to them that he said, with a half smile, "Well, I guess after all the biggest joke is on me. Here I am owning a newspaper and I can't even read a proofsheets. What do you think I better do?"

"I'll give you back the down payment you made," old John offered quickly, and a light that had long been dulled shone again in his faded eyes then. "I sort of have a notion I'd like to get back into business, myself."

Joe Rigdon nodded. "It's a deal!" And past John's beaming face he saw the girl's brown eyes, smiling at him. He added, "I better get another letter off to my lawyer, at Twin Falls. Last night I wrote him that I was into something pretty steep here and if I didn't come out of it, he was to sell my ranch and pay off the rest of my note to you. I hope he won't be startin' to look for a buyer."

Nancy started to say solemnly, "Joe Rigdon, I don't know how dad and I—or anyone else in Red Butte—and began to thank you—"

He cut her off, with a smile. "You might try offering me a job for my brother Harry. You know, crippled or not, he's a darn good newspaperman. And I'd like to see him and his family settled here." His eyes were level on her own. "It'd be nice to have connections—to give me an excuse for comin' back to Red Butte, often."

She must have known what he meant. He hoped she did, because, the way he felt, it would be some time before he could work up the nerve to say the rest of it.

BULLET BARGAIN

(Continued from page 93)

mount, Baldy. As the horses collided, Gibb's heard two heavy shots ring out, felt a slapping blow against his thigh, and pulled Baldy down from his run just as Blue Hutchins slumped forward in the saddle and pitched down.

Gibbs reined to a fast halt. As he ran toward the fallen man, his fingers found the outlaw's derringier thrust beneath his own belt. Slapping against his side was his holster, heavy again with the gun which Hutchins had lifted in the bedroom.

The horsemen were coming fast, and Gibbs knelt beside Blue Hutchins. The big man smiled crookedly. "I didn't shoot those trainmen, Gibbs," he said hoarsely. "The gang did. I gave 'em hell for it, but my word wasn't worth much with these two slugs in me. I wasn't much of a man by your standards, Gibbs, but I always paid my debts—"

The possemen dismounted and ran to the fallen man. He looked up at the sheriff and snarled in that sharp, harsh voice, "Gibbs got me, sheriff, but I darned near made him get me across the border. *Hasta la vista* to the hangman. I beat him anyhow."

There were mutterings from the possemen, then silence; Gibbs stared at the dying man upon the ground, fingered the strange, smooth steel of a derringier.

The sheriff spoke at last. "The reward said 'dead or alive,' Gibbs, so you get the money. Maybe I owe you an apology, too, Gibbs," he added.

"Thanks," said Gibbs tonelessly. His eyes swept the expanse of land before them—the range which might soon have belonged to Morgan. The reward money would take care of that debt, but he could feel no elation. A man paid his debts, he thought, with a part of himself—always. It was good to know that from now on he would not be beholden to anyone—and even better to know no one, not even Blue Hutchins, was beholden to him.

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(Continued from page 67)

Lannegan moved restlessly. "I'll be gettin' along now, Laura. I'll drop by and see George before I leave."

The woman shook her head. "You'll go nowhere, Jim Lannegan. You've been in bed ten days, and you'll be here another ten at least. You were shot bad, Jim. We had to bring a special doctor from Fort Worth."

He heard movement by the door and looked up to see a blonde head.

Laura said, "Jim, Linda Carroll has been helping me take care of you. You've been a handful, cowboy." She motioned for the girl to come in. "Keep him company, Linda. I've got to get dinner."

The girl moved up to the bed and sat down on the edge of it. She said, "The great Lannegan," and there was a huskiness in her voice that stirred him strangely.

He said, "Did you buy yourself that drink?" She shook her head. "No," she said. "No, I bought Jeb Moody's place instead."

He stared at her crazily. "Moody's place?" She nodded. "You said once that you had no reason to stay here. The Moody place is in your name. You've got a reason now."

A warmth seeped through his body, coloring his face. He said, "Yes, I guess I have." He wasn't thinking about the Moody place.

(Continued from page 102)

Jim ordered, "Take off your masks." Flowerpot watched, and seeing the Wells Fargo agent's face, blurted, "Creel!" Creel's companion from the lunchroom, Sid Brant, the town blacksmith, was the other man.

Then, as Creel and the blacksmith were escorted jailward by the two pardners, Long Jim reflected, "James and Jugg. Sounds like a firm of lawyers."

Flowerpot was preoccupied. "Who do you suppose pried the bars on our cell?"

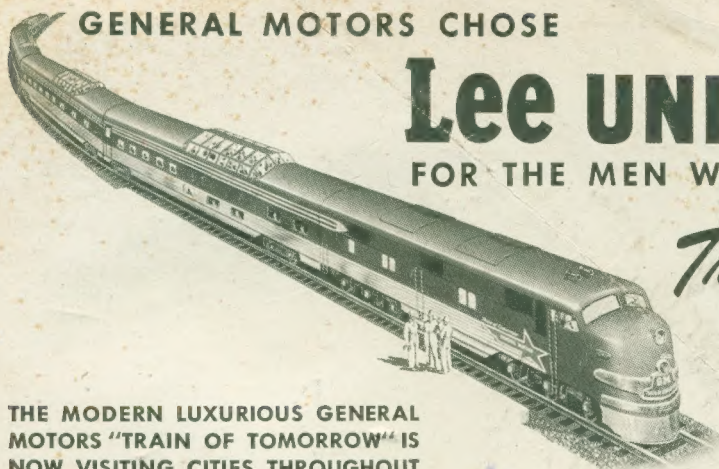
"Either Creel or the blacksmith, as I suspected one of 'em would, so we'd leave town an' be blamed for the bank robbery."

"But what made you guess ahead of time he was going to do it?" Flowerpot demanded.

"Cleo's talk about one bandit having a beard. I recalled seeing Brant in the blacksmith shop with an iron bar in his hands. The rest was simple figurin'."

Afterwards, as the pardners rode leisurely from town, Long Jim Lane turned in saddle and said, "Farewell, Tailholt—town of T-bone steaks and help wanted signs."

Flowerpot Pratt loosed a gusty sigh. "Sometimes you talk like a dad-blamed lunatic," he complained. Then a sheepish smile tilted his tangled beard and he added, "But bein' with a lunatic is better'n bein' alone."



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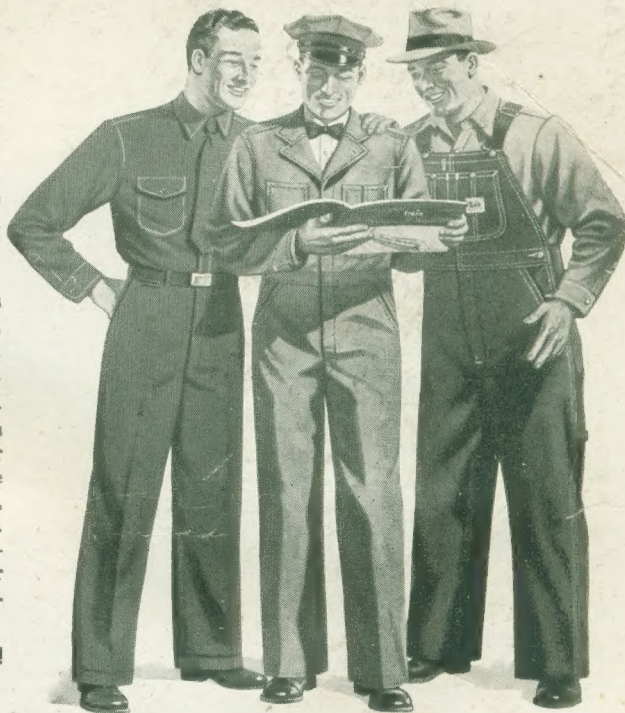
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Mechanics... Oil Men... Engineers...
Welders... Plastic Producers...
Electricians... Metal Workers...
Miners... Weavers... and many others.

There are many reasons for Lee-Leadership among men who do all types of work. Exclusive Lee fabrics wear longer and wash better... Lee "Tailored Sizes" give you perfect fit, lasting comfort and better appearance. Many other Lee features result in satisfying Lee Work Clothes ownership for you. **BUY LEE WORK CLOTHES... AT LEADING STORES COAST TO COAST.**

THERE'S A LEE FOR EVERY JOB!

Jeit Denim Overalls • Union-Alls • Matched
Shirts and Pants • Dungarees • Cowboy Pants



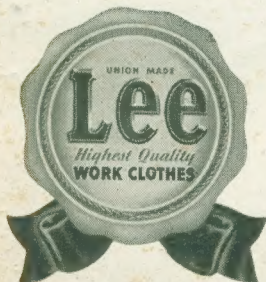
Men Who Work to Build America...

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In a National Survey by a prominent publishing company the questions were asked, "What brand of Overalls, Coveralls, Matched Shirts and Pants do you prefer?" Lee Overalls and Lee Matched Shirts and Pants led by a margin of "6 to 1" over the next brand. Lee Union-Alls led by a margin of "9 to 1" over the next brand.

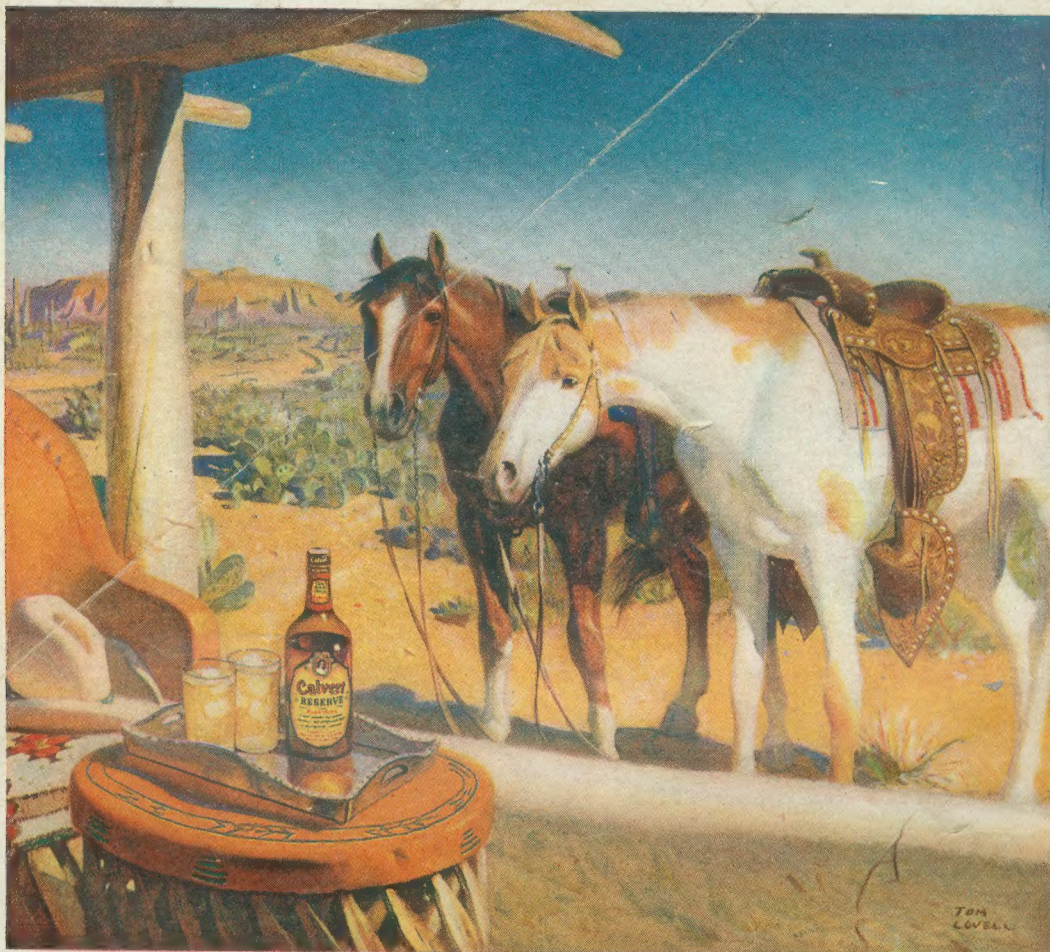
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WORLD'S LARGEST MANUFACTURERS OF UNION-MADE WORK CLOTHES

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